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ABSTRACT

Designed to be used with the 8-part public television series "The Language of Life with Bill Moyers," this guide serves as a learning resource for the study of contemporary American poetry. The guide presents 18 full-size cards that feature the work of each of the poets in the series; selected poems that appear in the series; questions for thought and discussion that help students examine issues raised by the programs; and classroom activities, including writing exercises. The guide also includes a one-page essay ("Welcoming Poetry to Our Classrooms" by James Haba) that offers provocative ideas on teaching poetry, a 47-item selected bibliography, advice on using the guide, and a 22-item list of books that make up a core high school poetry collection. (RS)

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The Language of Life with Bill Moyers

Produced and Directed by David Grubin

TEACHER'S GUIDE

INCLUDES:

- 18 Poet Cards
- Welcoming Poetry to Our Classrooms
- Selected Bibliography
- Building a Core High School Poetry Collection

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Funding for this Guide is provided by the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation and the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.

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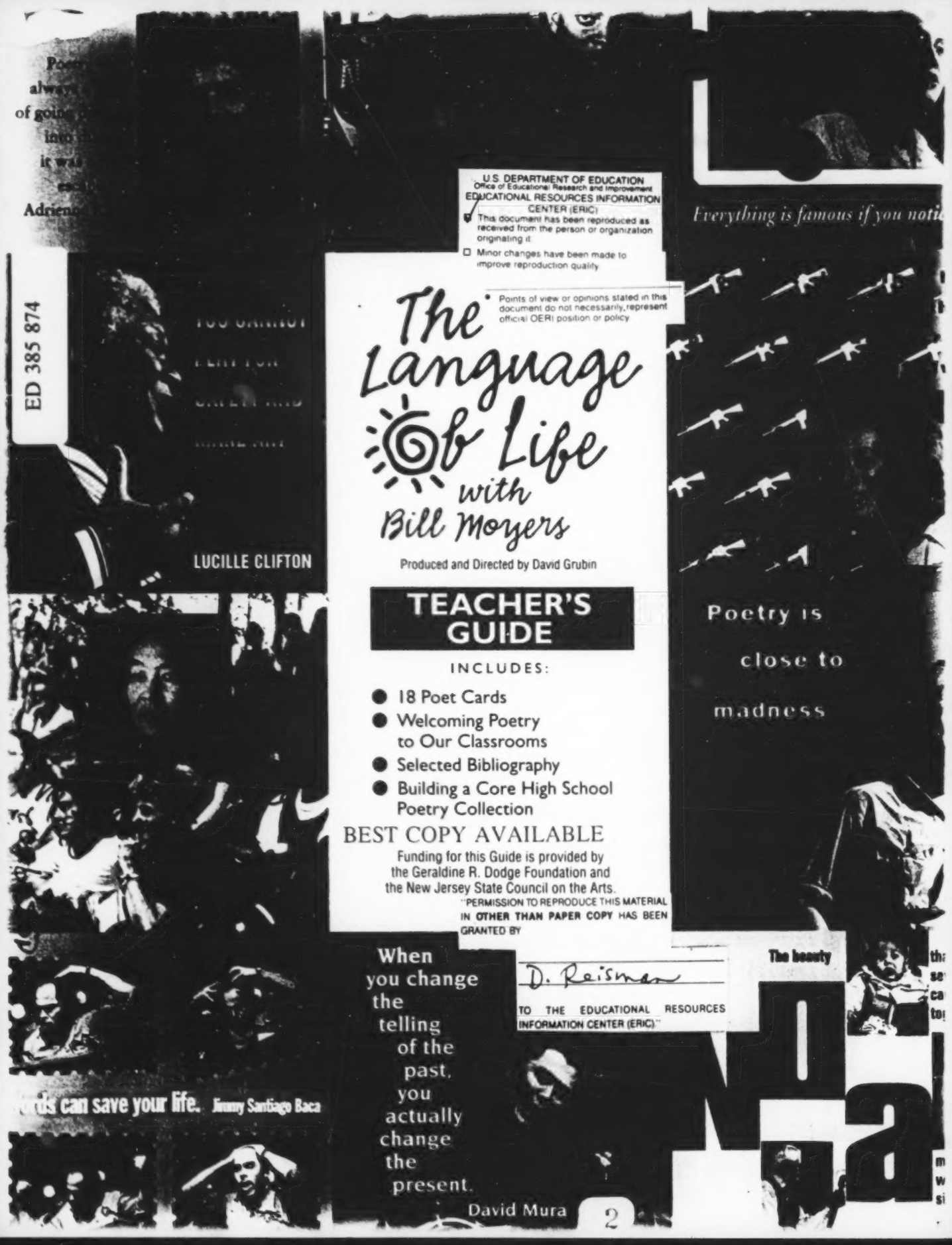
LUCILLE CLIFTON
Everything is famous if you noti
Poetry is close to madness
When you change the telling of the past, you actually change the present.
David Mura
2

Victor Hernández Cru

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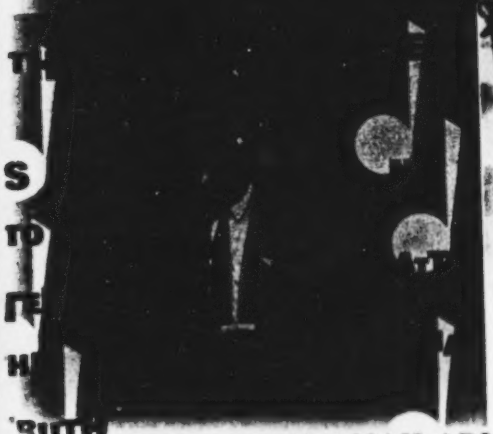
something
is hard to live
ugh day by day.

You're trying to understand what you're living through by using the the tools of words and images and the beautiful inner structure of language.

Poetry is the voice of the soul, whispering, celebrating, singing even.

Carolyn



I am blessed by
I am blesse
consciousness.
a poet, a profou
joyful person. I
great sadness,
s often with me
but I feel as if I wanted
so much to get in, and
I'm one of the lucky
ones who knows that
I got in. . . into the field

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DEAR EDUCATOR:

When I was a schoolboy, our teachers required us to memorize poems. By copying the lines over and over, I excelled at the sport. But it was only a sport. The words I had committed to memory were divorced from meaning or emotions. I knew the poems but not the experience of them. It was only later, when a series of English teachers began to read serious poetry aloud in class, that I heard the music in the words. As Maya Angelou subsequently told me in an interview, "Poetry is music written for the human voice."

We have captured much of that music in our new PBS series, THE LANGUAGE OF LIFE. These eight programs were filmed at the 1994 Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival, an event rich in images, humor, and wisdom, with transcendent moments that challenged old ways of seeing the world. Thousands of people – students and adults – came away with an exhilarating new awareness of the riches of language.

All across the country poetry readings are enjoying a resurgent popularity as a stage on which fresh voices take up the democratic conversation. As I listened to the readings at the Dodge Festival and interviewed the eighteen poets who appear in the series, I sensed how wondrously diverse cultures and points of view are contributing to American discourse. Because they come from many places, the poets of our time are infusing powerful new energy and idioms into our conversations. Their language is the most honest language I hear today. Against the sybaritic images of advertising that daily wash over us, against the sententious rhetoric of politics, poetry stands, in W.S. Merwin's words, as "the expression of faith in the integrity of the senses and of the imagination." Democracy needs her poets, in all their diversity and with all their honesty, precisely because our hope for survival is in recognizing the reality of one another's lives.

I value the experience of poetry in the lives of your students, and I salute the efforts of teachers across the country who awaken each new generation of young people to its delights. I join with your colleagues who have worked to prepare the enclosed materials in welcoming you and your classes to THE LANGUAGE OF LIFE.

Sincerely,

Bill Moyers

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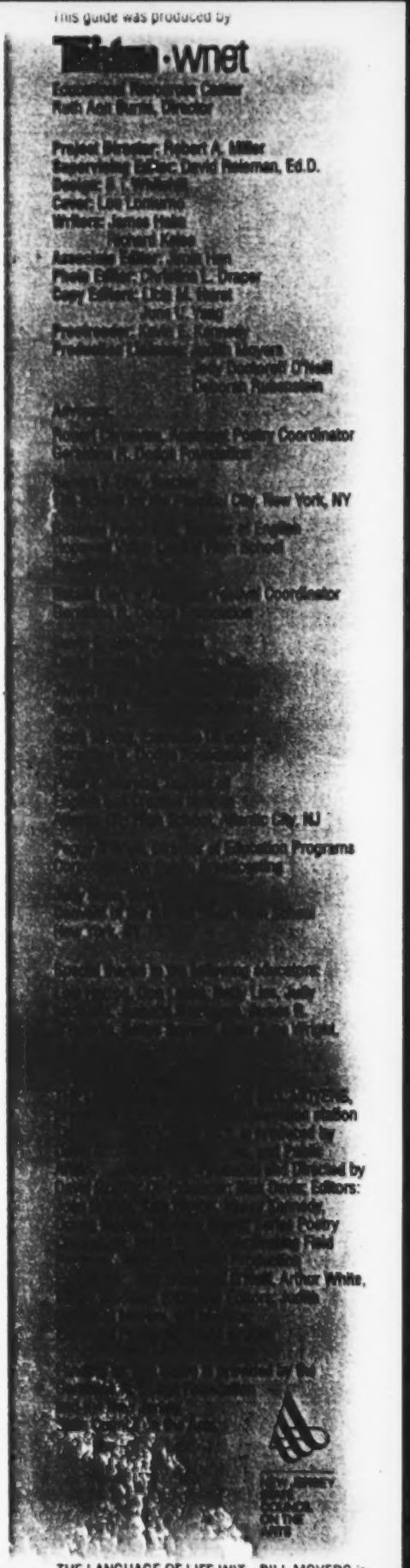


THE LANGUAGE OF LIFE WIT. BILL MOYERS is

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

THE LANGUAGE OF LIFE WITH BILL MOYERS is an eight-part public television series produced and directed by David Grubin that explores the renaissance of public poetry in America. Filmed at the 1994 Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival, it features eighteen poets whose personalities, ideas, and points of view reflect the power and diversity of contemporary American poetry. In film segments of their readings and in interviews with Bill Moyers, we see the vitality and continued relevance of poetry – not only for dealing with emotions and ideas difficult to express in everyday language, but also for connecting us with life's mystery, pain, and possibilities. This guide is designed to be used with the series, but it will also serve teachers as a learning resource for the study of contemporary American poetry.

CONTENTS OF THE GUIDE

This guide includes:

- **18 Poet Cards** featuring the work of each poet in the series. These cards may be photocopied and handed out to your students in class, but only if the entire card is photocopied as is, and only for the use of your students. Each card includes: selected poems that appear in the series; questions for thought and discussion that help students examine issues raised by the programs; and classroom activities, including writing exercises, that help students explore some of the ideas and possibilities introduced by the series;
- **Welcoming Poetry to Our Classrooms** (opposite panel), which offers provocative ideas on teaching poetry;
- a **Selected Bibliography;**
- **Building a Core High School Poetry Collection.**

USING THE GUIDE

Each program in THE LANGUAGE OF LIFE is 60 minutes. Interviews and poetry readings by a featured poet are intercut with interviews and readings by the other poet or poets in a program (with the exception of Coleman Barks). Therefore, it's important to preview the program to find the segments you'd like to focus on in class. Some of the poets deal with sensitive or disturbing subjects such as sexual abuse, domestic violence, or political violence, and **we recommend previewing the programs and reading the cards carefully** before assigning these materials to your students.

The following steps will help optimize your use of both the programs and guide:

Preview the program *from the series you'd like to discuss, and choose the segments you'd like to show in class. Remember: You can tape programs from THE LANGUAGE OF LIFE and keep them for one year after the broadcast.*

Have students ***watch the whole program*** *on air, or show segments of the program in class.*

Hand out photocopies *of the poet cards.*

Discuss *what you've seen. You may use the questions that appear on the poet cards.*

Have students ***do activities****.*

Frequently, questions and activities that appear on the poet cards may be adapted for discussing the work of other poets in the series. We have flagged these questions and activities with asterisks.

A NOTE ON INTERDISCIPLINARY USE

THE LANGUAGE OF LIFE Teacher's Guide can be used in the arts, foreign language, and social studies as well as in English classes. The poets in the series represent many different cultures and points of view. Their voices can spark interest in students about events or historical periods and bring human scale and perspective to larger concepts. We encourage you to share these materials with your colleagues who are teaching other subjects.

PROGRAMS IN THE LANGUAGE OF LIFE WITH BILL MOYERS

Program 1: **Welcome to the Mainland**
Poets: Sekou Sundiata and Naomi Shihab Nye

Program 2: **Love's Confusing Joy**
Poet: Coleman Barks (translator of Jelaluddin Rumi)

Program 3: **The Field of Time**
Poets: Linda McCarriston and Sandra McPherson

Program 4: **Some Can Sing**
Poets: Robert Hass, Claribel Alegria, and Carolyn Forché

Program 5: **Here in the Mind**
Poets: Gary Snyder and Daisy Zamora

Program 6: **Swirl Like a Leaf**
Poets: Jimmy Santiago Baca, Marilyn Chin, and Robert Bly

Program 7: **The Heart of Things**
Poets: Adrienne Rich, Victor Hernández Cruz, and Michael S. Harper

Program 8: **Come Celebrate with Me**
Poets: Lucille Clifton and David Mura

PROGRAM SCHEDULING

THE LANGUAGE OF LIFE WITH BILL MOYERS will be rebroadcast in Fall 1995. Please contact your local public television station for scheduling information. THE LANGUAGE OF LIFE WITH BILL MOYERS was first broadcast in June and July 1995. Educators have the right to tape the programs and play them for instructional purposes for one year after the broadcast.

Welcoming Poetry to Our Classrooms

By James Haba

With Robert Hass's remark that "There's a sense in which poetry is not so much the writing of words as it is the movement of breath itself" (on his poet card), our new Poet Laureate reminds us how intimately *every* aspect of *each* of our lives is connected to poetry. Poetry is part of everywhere we go and everything we do. So in welcoming poetry to our classrooms, we naturally make those rooms infinitely larger, more inclusive, and more human spaces.

Because poetry brings with it all aspects of life, it naturally enriches our classes in many curriculum areas – English, social studies, foreign languages, and the fine arts, among others. Additionally, contemporary poetry can bear witness or bring fresh perspectives to the events of our time. And more fundamentally, poetry can help us examine our familiar or reassuring habits of thought.

Like all art, poetry asks us to pause, to stop whatever we are doing or thinking, and to put aside for a moment the assumptions about the world which usually govern our perception and behavior. Free of preoccupations and expectations, we may begin to open ourselves to the often astonishingly different logic and ways of seeing within the world of the poem.

Among other things poetry is about *saying*: Linda McCarriston reminds us that poetry allows us to "say the *unsayable*," to expose what our society often forbids us to discuss openly; David Mura and Sekou Sundiata remind us of home-grown prejudice and injustice; and while the poems of Claribel Alegría may be used in Spanish classes to show how poems are translated, they also illustrate political oppression and economic exploitation in Central America. Because poetry can put us in touch with what we yearn to say but cannot say, either for lack of ability or lack of permission, it often brings such great emotional urgency into the classroom that we may at first feel overwhelmed.

Gary Snyder's poem "How Poetry Comes to Me" (on his poet card) offers one way to approach this urgency without becoming incapacitated by it. Here poetry is a kind of wild thing, "blundering" at night over the boulders toward the campfire, which it finds simultaneously fascinating and frightening. To the degree that poetry *is* a shy wild thing, the primary issue for us teachers may be how we can make ourselves less frightening to it. Gary Snyder's poem seems to recommend going out to meet poetry, and at least halfway.

Closer to home, Adrienne Rich's poem "In a Classroom" (on her poet card) powerfully reminds us of our teacherly temptation to become "caught in the how, oblivious of why." Only the face of Jude, "neither frowning nor nodding, / opaque in the slant of dust-motes over the table" awakens this teacher from her preoccupation with how and jolts her into remembering why: Jude's *"What I cannot say, is me. For that I came."*

The shocking understanding suddenly granted when she reads in Jude's face his unspoken words uncannily resembles the instinctive movement, in Snyder's poem "How Poetry Comes to Me," away from the security of the campfire and out to where our world of artificial light meets poetry's world of natural darkness. Both poems seem to suggest that we cannot receive something startlingly new – "poetry is not so much the writing of words as it is the movement of breath itself" – without abandoning something dearly familiar. So welcoming poetry to our classrooms might begin with the question "Which familiar assumption or reassuring experience will I let go of *first?*"

James Haba is a poet and teacher.

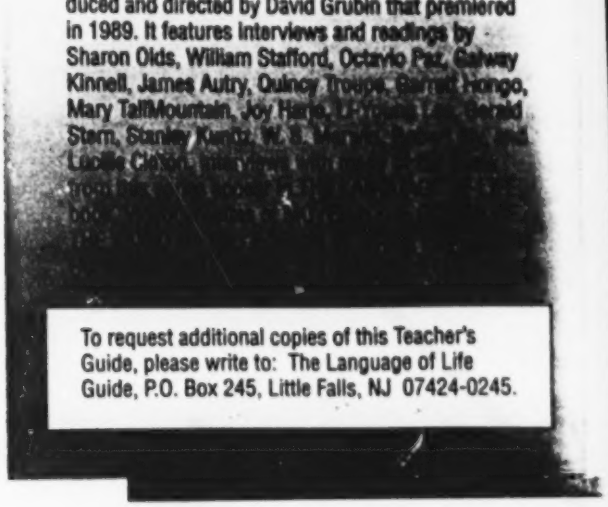
The Language of Life with Bill Moyers

THE LANGUAGE OF LIFE WITH BILL MOYERS
is a co-production of David Grubin Productions, Inc.
and Public Affairs Television, Inc.

Ordering Information

THE LANGUAGE OF LIFE WITH BILL MOYERS is published in book and audiocassette formats by Doubleday and is available at your local bookstore or by calling toll-free 1-800-323-9287. In Illinois, call 708-827-1111. Videocassettes of the series are available by calling Films for the Humanities and Sciences at 1-800-257-5126.

MOYERS: THE POWER OF THE WORD is a six-part public television series on contemporary poetry produced and directed by David Grubin that premiered in 1989. It features interviews and readings by Sharon Olds, William Stafford, Octavio Paz, Galway Kinnell, James Autry, Quincy Troupe, Barrett Hongo, Mary TallMountain, Joy Harjo, [illegible] Stern, Stanley Kunitz, W. S. [illegible] Lucille Clifton [illegible]



To request additional copies of this Teacher's Guide, please write to: The Language of Life Guide, P.O. Box 245, Little Falls, NJ 07424-0245.

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BUILDING A CORE HIGH SCHOOL POETRY COLLECTION

Total approximate cost $500

BASIC

cost approximately $250

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Errata

Poet Card Photo Credits

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Program 1: **Welcome to the Mainland**

SEKOU SUNDIATA

"There's poetry in the language I speak. There's poetry, therefore, in my culture, and in this place."

Sekou Sundiata was born and raised in Harlem, New York. His work owes much to the music, poetry, and oral traditions of African-American culture. He says, "What I do is inspired and influenced by music, in particular, jazz, improvisational music. . . . In poetry, developing the sound that is mine means everything to me." He teaches at the New School for Social Research, and frequently takes his poetry on tour in Europe and the United States.

DIJERRIDO*

In your right mind
you say it can't
be done: *the highwire walk*
without the wire
You exhale and breathe-in
without pause,
for as long as you can feel
one seamless stream.
The music never breaks,
it stops when you stop.
The word for this is dijerrido
and circular breathing,
the switching point
between what you hear
and what you can be led
to believe: wind
moving through wood,
the pressure of blood
against the walls of veins,
the pull of ovum and sperm,
the dreamy mantra of the Interstate
turning into a drowsy hum.
You could like being lost
once you've come this far
what you dream up is deeper
than what you know.
Like the sound the mind makes
at the root, only lower
below habits of thinking, below
the unseen motion
of synapse and hook, of a sigh, of a gaze.
What story does it tell?
Wood and lung and air
at the end of breathing
as we know it to be,
things we cannot explain,
the spells we want to be under.

* Dijerrido is a wooden, tubular-shaped aboriginal instrument. Mastery of the dijerrido is accomplished by mastering the technique of circular breathing which allows the player to produce a continuous stream of sound for an indefinite period of time. In an interview, somebody asked E.L. Doctorow what he was trying to accomplish with his craft now that he is a master. Doctorow said he was now trying to do "the highwire act, without the wire."

SPACE'S MONOLOGUE from
"THE CIRCLE UNBROKEN IS A HARD BOP" (excerpt)

Two times Peace! From whence we come, that dark woman of a land only knows so well. How we tribalize our rest in the West, who can tell? Was once an X, our knocked over cross to bear, like the flatted fifth note of blue you hear, the terrible one we wear like a skin color. The Mystery come down once again crucify the sufferer for us to see, say X shall be your name until you "raise it and praise it," the Free you seek before you everywhere like air. In the beginning in the beginning, black and shining was our X . . . We was nuts from the gitgo insane from the whatnot nuts from the gitgo insane from the whatnot. Hit me two times, Peace Peace.

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QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT:

Why is "what you dream up" deeper than what you know?

SEKOU SUNDIATA

BLINK YOUR EYES

(Remembering Sterling A. Brown)

I was on my way to see my woman
but the Law said I was on my way
thru a red light red light red light
and if you saw my woman
you could understand,
I was just being a man
It wasn't about no light
it was about my ride
and if you saw my ride
you could dig that too, you dig?
Sunroof stereo radio black leather
bucket seats sit low you know,
the body's cool, but the tires are worn.
Ride when the hard time come, ride
when they're gone, in other words
the light was green.

I could wake up in the morning
without a warning
and my world could change:
blink your eyes.
All depends, all depends on the skin,
all depends on the skin you're living in.

Up to the window comes the Law
with his hand on his gun
what's up? what's happening?
I said I guess
that's when I really broke the law.
He said *a routine, step out the car*
a routine, assume the position.
Put your hands up in the air
you know the routine, like you just don't care.
License and registration.
Deep was the night and the light
from the North Star on the car door, deja vu
we've been through this before,
why did you stop me?
Somebody had to stop you.
I watch the news, you always lose.
You're unreliable, that's undeniable.
This is serious, you could be dangerous.

I could wake up in the morning
without a warning
and my world could change:
blink your eyes.
All depends, all depends on the skin,
all depends on the skin you're living in.

New York City, they got laws
can't no bruthas drive outdoors,
in certain neighborhoods, on particular streets
near and around certain types of people.
They got laws.
All depends, all depends on the skin,
all depends on the skin you're living in.

"Blink Your Eyes," "Space's Monologue from 'The Circle Unbroken is a Hard Bop'" (excerpt), and "Djerrido" courtesy of Sekou Sundiata

QUESTIONS

1. Sekou Sundiata says his poems are grounded in music. Describe the musical elements you find in "Djerrido" and the excerpt from "Space's Monologue." Read the poems silently, then read them aloud. How does the experience of these musical elements differ when you read the poems silently and then aloud?

*2. Sundiata speaks of the "felt truth" of a poem. You might think of "felt truth" as the emotions stirred in you by a poem. What is the felt truth of "Blink Your Eyes"? Quote specific words or lines in which you feel truth.

*3. How did seeing and hearing Sekou Sundiata read "Blink Your Eyes" affect the way you experienced the poem? Would you have had a different understanding of the poem if you hadn't seen and heard the poet?

ACTIVITIES

*1. Performance and the oral tradition are important elements of Sekou Sundiata's poetry. Try reading the excerpt from "Space's Monologue" aloud. Listen to how it changes as you read it again and again. Then, with a group, listen to how each person reads it. How are your interpretations different from Sekou Sundiata's reading of "Space's Monologue"?

2. Sekou Sundiata says, "There's poetry . . . in this place," and many of his poems describe specific places. Choose a place you know. Write down its memorable details — what you see, feel, hear, smell, and taste while you are there. Then arrange the details in a way that you think expresses the poetry of the place. You may want to share your writing with others, especially those who know that place.

3. Sundiata's poem "Djerrido" honors the unique characteristics of a musical instrument and the player of that instrument. Choose an instrument and learn as much as you can about it. Watch someone play it, noticing how it's played and how it sounds. Then honor the instrument and the player by writing a poem that responds to them.

*May be adapted for discussing the work of other poets.

Program 1: **Welcome to the Mainland**

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE

"Poetry is a conversation with the world; poetry is a conversation with the words on the page in which you allow those words to speak back to you; and poetry is a conversation with yourself."

The daughter of a Palestinian father and an American mother, Naomi Shihab Nye's dual heritage has endowed her with a sense of continuity across borders. Her poetry shows her fascination with seemingly insignificant things. She says, "...the mother speaking to the child is also a poem...I am loyal to those domestic impulses that want to acknowledge all the little parts of our lives." She lives in San Antonio, Texas.

FAMOUS

The river is famous to the fish.

The loud voice is famous to silence,
which knew it would inherit the earth
before anybody said so.

The cat sleeping on the fence is famous to the birds
watching him from the birdhouse.

The tear is famous, briefly, to the cheek.
The idea you carry close to your bosom
is famous to your bosom.

The boot is famous to the earth,
more famous than the dress shoe,
which is famous only to floors.

The bent photograph is famous to the one who carries it
and not at all famous to the one who is pictured.

I want to be famous to shuffling men
who smile while crossing streets,
sticky children in grocery lines,
famous as the one who smiled back.

I want to be famous in the way a pulley is famous,
or a buttonhole, not because it did anything spectacular,
but because it never forgot what it could do.

THE ART OF DISAPPEARING

When they say Don't I know you?
say no

When they invite you to the party
remember what parties are like
before answering
Someone telling you in a loud voice
they once wrote a poem
Greasy sausage balls on a paper plate
Then reply

If they say We should get together
say why?

It's not that you don't love them anymore
You're trying to remember something
too important to forget
Trees. The monastery bell at twilight
Tell them you have a new project
It will never be finished

When someone recognizes you in a grocery store
nod briefly and become a cabbage
When someone you haven't seen in ten years
appears at the door
don't start singing him all your new songs
You will never catch up

Walk around feeling like a leaf
Know you could tumble any second
Then decide what to do with your time

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QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT:

What will you do with your time?

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE

THE MAN WHO MAKES BROOMS

So you come with these maps in your head
and I come with voices chiding me to
"speak for my people"
and we march around like guardians of memory
till we find the man on the short stool
who makes brooms.

Thumb over thumb, straw over straw,
he will not look at us.
In his stony corner there is barely room
for baskets and thread,
much less the weight of our faces
staring at him from the street.
What he has lost or not lost is his secret.

You say he is like all the men,
the man who sells pistachios,
the man who rolls the rugs.
Older now, you find holiness in anything
that continues, dream after dream.
I say he is like nobody,
the pink seam he weaves
across the flat golden face of the broom
is its own shrine, and forget about the tears.

In the village the uncles will raise their *keffiyahs*
from dominoes to say, no brooms in America?
And the girls who stoop to sweep the courtyard
will stop for a moment and cock their heads.
It is a little song, this thumb over thumb,
but sometimes when you wait years
for the air to break open
and sense to fall out,
it may be the only one.

JERUSALEM

QUESTIONS

1. In "Arabic Coffee," Naomi Shihab Nye watches her father make coffee. How does the act of making coffee become a ceremony of unity? Who were the guests drawn to the table by Papa's coffee-making?

2. Naomi Shihab Nye has said, "I think the tiniest moments are the most splendid." How do you think she shows this in "The Man Who Makes Brooms" and "Arabic Coffee"? How would you describe a tiny, splendid moment you have experienced?

3. Describe your reactions to "Famous" and "The Art of Disappearing." Which words, phrases, or lines from the poems were most meaningful for you? Why?

ARABIC COFFEE

It was never too strong for us:
make it blacker, Papa,
thick in the bottom,
tell again how the years will gather
in small white cups,
how luck lives in a spot of grounds.

Leaning over the stove, he let it
boil to the top, and down again.
Two times. No sugar in his pot.
And the place where men and women
break off from one another
was not present in that room.
The hundred disappointments,
fire swallowing olive-wood beads
at the warehouse, and the dreams
tucked like pocket handkerchiefs
into each day, took their places
on the table, near the half-empty
dish of corn. And none was
more important than the others,
and all were guests. When
he carried the tray into the room,
high and balanced in his hands,
it was an offering to all of them,
stay, be seated, follow the talk
wherever it goes. The coffee was
the center of the flower.
Like clothes on a line saying
you will live long enough to wear me,
a motion of faith. There is this,
and there is more.

ACTIVITIES

1. In "Valentine for Ernest," Naomi Shihab Nye speaks of finding "poems in the eyes of skunks." Where do you find poems? Perhaps it's a place, an animal, a person, or an object. Describe what you see so as to show the poetry in these things.

2. Naomi Shihab Nye has said, "I have many heroes in the world of poetry, and their poems are famous in my mind." Choose a poet that you like and memorize one of his or her poems. Then share the poem with others. Explain why you chose that poet and what drew you to that poem.

3. "Famous" puts a spotlight on some simple, ordinary things. What ordinary things are "famous" for you? Describe how these things are famous. Make a collage of words and images that celebrates these things; or write a poem in the style of "Famous" that lists ordinary objects and situations in which they are well-known.

"Famous," "The Art of Disappearing," "The Man Who Makes Brooms," and "Arabic Coffee" are reprinted from *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems* by Naomi Shihab Nye, published by Far Corner Books, Portland, Oregon. Copyright © 1995 by Naomi Shihab Nye. Reprinted by permission. Available from Consortium Book Sales & Distribution, 1-800-283-3572.

Program 2: **Love's Confusing Joy**

COLEMAN BARKS

"Poetry is close to madness."

Since 1976 Coleman Barks, together with Persian linguist John Moyne, has brought English readers the humor and wisdom of the poems of Jelaluddin Rumi, the 13th-century Sufi mystic. Barks says, "I think for Rumi joy is primary. To some people, the world seems full of grief, but Rumi would say, 'I think the world is primarily graceful, a gift.' " A poet in his own right, Barks teaches at the University of Georgia in Athens.

A friend remarks to the Prophet, "Why is it
I get screwed in business deals?
It's like a spell. I become distracted
by business talk and make wrong decisions."

Muhammed replies, "Stipulate with every transaction
that you need three days to make sure."

Deliberation is one of the qualities of God.
Throw a dog a bit of something.
He sniffs to see if he wants it.

Be that careful.
Sniff with your wisdom-nose.
Get clear. Then decide.

The universe came into being gradually
over six days. God could have just commanded,
Be!

Little by little a person reaches forty and fifty and sixty,
and feels more complete. God could have thrown
full-blown prophets
flying through the cosmos in an instant.

Jesus said one word, and a dead man sat up,
but Creation usually unfolds,
like calm breakers.

Constant, slow movement teaches us to keep working
like a small creek that stays clear,
that doesn't stagnate, but finds a way
through numerous details, deliberately.

Deliberation is born of joy,
like a bird from an egg.

Birds don't resemble eggs!
Think how different the hatching out is.

A white-leathery snake egg, a sparrow's egg;
a quince seed, an apple seed: Very different things
look similar at one stage.

These leaves, our bodily personalities, seem identical,
but the globe of soul-fruit
we make,
each is elaborately
unique.

(Mathnawi, III, 3494-3516)

WHO MAKES THESE CHANGES?

Who makes these changes?
I shoot an arrow right
It lands left
I ride after a deer and find myself
chased by a hog
I plot to get what I want
and end up in prison
I dig pits to trap others
and fall in

I should be suspicious
of what I want

(*Mathnawi*, VI, 3682-3687)

158

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase *each other*
doesn't make any sense.

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QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT:

Why should you be suspicious of what you want?

COLEMAN BARKS

82

Today, like every other day, we wake up empty
and frightened. Don't open the door to the study
and begin reading. Take down a musical instrument.

Let the beauty we love be what we do.
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the
ground.

837

We can't help being thirsty,
moving toward the voice
of water.
Milk-drinkers draw close
to the mother. Muslims, Christians, Jews,
Buddhists, Hindus, shamans,
everyone hears the intelligent sound
and moves, with thirst, to meet it.

Clean your ears. Don't listen
for something you've heard before.

Invisible camel bells,
slight footfalls in sand.

Almost in sight! The first word they call out
will be the last word of our last poem.

QUESTIONS

1. In the poem which begins "A friend remarks to the Prophet," Rumi says to "sniff with your wisdom-nose." Sniff the poems on this card with your "wisdom-nose. / Get clear." Then decide which ones are for you. What led you to choose as you did? See if your choices change after working with these questions and activities.

2. Rumi spoke these poems to his friends and students as part of his continuous teaching. What is being taught? Why is this teaching done through poetry? You might begin by considering the poem "Who Makes These Changes?"

3. Coleman Barks has said that poetry is close to madness. Which of these poems might illustrate that remark? Why? Have any of them slipped over into madness? How do you know? What have you learned about madness by reading these poems? What have you learned about the opposite of madness? What is the opposite of madness?

WHO SAYS WORDS WITH MY MOUTH

All day I think about it, then at night I say it.
Where did I come from, and what am I supposed to be doing?
I have no idea.
My soul is from elsewhere, I'm sure of that,
and I intend to end up there.

This drunkenness began in some other tavern.
When I get back around to that place,
I'll be completely sober. Meanwhile,
I'm like a bird from another continent, sitting in this aviary.
The day is coming when I fly off,
but who is it now in my ear, who hears my voice?
Who says words with my mouth?

Who looks out with my eyes? What is the soul?
I cannot stop asking.
If I could taste one sip of an answer,
I could break out of this prison for drunks.
I didn't come here of my own accord, and I can't leave that way.
Whoever brought me here will have to take me home.

This poetry. I never know what I'm going to say.
I don't plan it.
When I'm outside the saying of it,
I get very quiet and rarely speak at all.

ACTIVITIES

1. These poems were spoken spontaneously to a circle of friends. Read what Rumi says about poetry in "Who Says Words With My Mouth." Then, with one or more partners, try making up spontaneous poems. First try saying two-line poems and go on from there. Keep in mind the "field out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing," and let your spontaneous words lead you toward that field.

*2. Create a visual or aural response to your favorite Rumi poem. You can work alone or with one or more partners and use any medium – for example, line, color, and shape, as well as photography, choreography, the unaccompanied voice, musical instruments, or life sounds.

*3. Select the Rumi poem which you would most like to read to music. Alone or with others, and with a specific instrument or with recordings, create a musical setting which will be the background against which you read the poem. Offer your arrangement to a group and listen to the arrangements of others.

"No. 837. We can't help being thirsty." and "A friend remarks to the Prophet." © Coleman Barks. Maypop Books. 1-800-682-8637. Reprinted by permission of Coleman Barks. "Who Says Words With My Mouth," "Who Makes These Changes," "Out Beyond Ideas," and "Today, like every other day" reprinted by permission of Threshold Books. RD 4 Box 600, Putney, VT 05346.

* May be adapted for discussing the work of other poets.

Program 3: **The Field of Time**

LINDA McCARRISTON

"Poetry allows one to speak with a voice of power that is not, in general, granted to one by the culture."

Linda McCarriston's poems are studies in healing and survival. Having seen and experienced domestic and sexual violence as a child, she felt that it was necessary to write poetry that dealt with these experiences. She recalls, "I had to speak back to the culture that I saw creating and sustaining the ideas that led to this violent situation in the first place." She teaches at the University of Alaska in Anchorage.

BILLY

As though a bare bulb hung
over your head as it does in
movie scenes of interrogation,
you are the single vivid thing
in the shades-of-gray memory,
the white center, out from which
the whole dank tenement
cellar — the dirt floor, the boulders
that formed the old foundation,
the three fat coal-burning
furnaces, one for each of the three
stories, the coal bins punky
across from each, the mud-thick
little windows above that were
coal shutes when the truck came,
the new table-saw, the new
table-saw overhead worklight,
and even our father,
who stood beating you with his fists
where he'd stuck you into
a barrel, as a mountaineer might plant
a banner into a peak, to keep your
skinny thirteen-year-old self erect
till he was finished — the whole
rest emanates and fades.
It was winter. You had driven
your homemade go-cart into a door
that he was saving for something.
I can see the little v's you made
in the paint. I see his upper body
plunging up and down like one
of those wind-driven lawn ornaments,
the one that is pumping.
The barrel reaches your bottom.
You must be holding onto it.
It must be braced against
his table saw. There are no words.
The barrel bangs and scrapes.
Your body sounds different than
a mattress. The noises he makes
are the noises of a man trying to
lift a Buick off the body of
a loved child, whose face he can
see, upturned, just above the wheel
that rests on her chest, her eyes right
on his eyes, as yours were on mine.

HEALING THE MARE

Just days after the vet came,
after the steroids that took
the fire out of the festering
sores — out of the flesh that in
the heat took the stings too
seriously and swelled into great
welts, wore thin and wept, calling
more loudly out to the green-
headed flies — I bathe you
and see your coat returning,
your new deep force surfacing in a
new layer of hide: black wax
alive against weather and flies.

But this morning, misshapen
still, you look like an effigy,
something rudely made, something
made to be buffeted, or like
an old comforter — are they both
one in the end? So both a child

and a mother, with my sponge and
my bucket, I come to anoint, to
anneal the still weeping, to croon
to you *baby poor baby* for the sake
of the song, to polish you up,
for the sake of the touch, to a shine.

As I soothe you I surprise wounds
of my own this long time unmothered.
As you stand, scathed and scabbed,
with your head up, I swab. As you
press, I lean into my own loving
touch, for which no wound
is too ugly.

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QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT:

When did you last surprise wounds of your own this long time unmothered?

LINDA McCARRISTON

HOTEL NIGHTS WITH MY MOTHER

The hometown flophouse
was what she could afford
the nights he came after us
with a knife. I'd grab my books,
already dreading the next day's
explanations of homework undone
— *I ran out of paper* — the lies
I'd invent standing in front of
the nuns in the clothes I'd lain in
full-bladdered all night, a flimsy
chair-braced door between us
and the hallway's impersonal riot.

Years later, then, in the next
city, standing before my first class,
I scanned the rows of faces,
their cumulative skill in the
brilliant adolescent dances
of self-presentation, of hiding.
New teacher, looking young, seeming
gullible, I know, I let them
give me any excuse and took it.
I was watching them all

for the dark-circled eyes,
yesterday's crumpled costume, the marks
— the sorrowful coloring of marks —
the cuticles flaming and torn.
I made of myself each day a chink
a few might pass through unscathed.

TREES

Trees in stands are families,
farmed that way by accident or design.
Defined by meadow, they wear
the shape of some man's hand.

The pasture pine, a volunteer,
wrenches itself upward unprotected.
It is a weathervane.
It is the one that ruptures stone walls.

QUESTIONS

1. What "unsayable" things does Linda McCarriston say in "Billy"? In "Hotel Nights With My Mother"? Why does she do it? What does she gain? What do you? How does her saying the unsayable affect her listeners or readers?

2. Describe the mood that Linda McCarriston creates in "Billy." How does the setting of the poem — "the whole dank tenement / cellar" — add to its mood? What other words or phrases remain with you? Why?

3. How does healing her horse in "Healing the Mare" help Linda McCarriston to heal herself?

ACTIVITIES

1. Linda McCarriston says that in writing her poems, she felt she had to "speak back to the culture" about situations that caused her pain. Think about situations which may have been painful to you and "speak back" to the culture in writing.

2. Suppose you could speak with complete freedom and authority, as Linda McCarriston does in some of her poems. Who would you speak to, what would you say, and why would you say it?

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Program 3: **The Field of Time**

SANDRA McPHERSON

"Though life may be painful, there is a joy and a power in writing, even when you're dealing with something that is hard to live through day by day. You're trying to understand what you're living through by using the tools of words and images and the beautiful inner structure of language."

Sandra McPherson's poems chronicle her evolution as a daughter, wife, and mother. She writes with poignancy about her high-functioning autistic daughter, and about having been adopted at birth. While her subject matter is serious, she says, "I always include humor in the most serious of my poems. . . everything has a comedic side. Or, if you're not laughing out loud, everything has at least a smile side." She teaches at the University of California, Davis.

ONE WAY SHE SPOKE TO ME

I would say, "Whisper." And she could
never figure how to do it. I would say,
"Speak louder," into the phone, nor
could she raise her voice.

But then I found such a whisper, the trail
as she began to write to me in snails,
in silver memos on the front door,
in witnesses to her sense of touch.

Home late, I found them slurred
and searching, erasing the welcome
she'd arranged them in:
H — twelve snails. I — seven or six.

They were misspelling it,
digressing in wayward caravans and pileups,
mobile and rolling but with little perspective,
their eyestalks smooth as nylons on tiny legs.

I raised her in isolation. But it is these snails
who keep climbing the walls. For them, maybe
every vertical makes an unending tree —
and every ascension's lovely.

Why else don't they wend homeward to ground?
But what do *we* do? We are only a part
of a letter in a word. And we are on our
bellies with speech, wondering, wondering slowly,

how to move toward one another.

HELEN TODD: MY BIRTHNAME

They did not come to claim you back.
To make me Helen again. Mother
Watched the dry, hot streets in case they came.
This is how she found a tortoise
Crossing between cars and saved it.
It's how she knew roof-rats raised families
In the palmtree heads. But they didn't come —
It's almost forty years.

I went to them. And now I know
Our name, quiet one. I believe you
Would have stayed in trigonometry and taken up
The harp. Math soothed you, music
Made you bold, and science, completely
Understanding. Wouldn't you have collected
Curated, in your adolescence, Mother Lode
Pyrites out of pity for their semblance
To gold? And three-leaf clovers to search
For some shy differences between them?

Knowing you myself at last — it seems you'd cut
Death in half and double everlasting life.
Quiet person named as a formality
At birth. I was not born. Only you were.

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QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT:

How *can* we move toward one another?

SANDRA McPHERSON

BAD MOTHER BLUES

When you were arrested, child, and I had to take your pocketknife
When you were booked and I had to confiscate your pocketknife
It had blood on it from where you'd tried to take your life

It was the night before Thanksgiving, all the family coming over
The night before Thanksgiving, all the family coming over
We had to hide your porno magazine and put your handcuffs undercover

Each naked man looked at you, said, Baby who do you think you are
Each man looked straight down on you, like a waiting astronomer's star
Solely, disgustedly, each wagged his luster

I've decided to throw horror down the well and wish on it
Decided I'll throw horror down the well and wish on it
And up from the water will shine my sweet girl in her baby bonnet

A thief will blind you with his flashlight
but a daughter be your bouquet
A thief will blind you with his flashlight
but a daughter be your bouquet
When the thief's your daughter you turn your eyes the other way

I'm going into the sunflower field where all of them are facing me
I'm going into the sunflower field so all of them are facing me
Going to go behind the sunflowers, feel all the sun that I can't see

QUESTIONS

1. Sandra McPherson says that "everything has a smile side." How does she show this in "Bad Mother Blues" and "Helen Todd: My Birthname"?

2. The poet has described some of her family members as "great characters" whom she tries to capture in poetry. Find one of these characters in any of her poems. Use lines from the poem to show how you recognized him or her. Who is a great character in your family or community? What makes the person a great character?

3. Sandra McPherson in "Bad Mother Blues" and Linda McCarriston in "Billy" write about people in their family. How would you describe similarities and differences in the family relationships that these poems address? What words and phrases from the poems support your conclusions?

4. When we are close to someone, we often find private ways of communicating — in code with friends, by touch with a boyfriend/ girlfriend, even by messages written in snails as in "One Way She Spoke to Me." Write about a special way you communicate with a close ally, or how you might try reaching out to such a person when ordinary speech seems impossible.

ACTIVITIES

1. In "Bad Mother Blues," Sandra McPherson found a form of expression — the blues song — that worked for her. Choose a specific form of music, such as the blues, a chant, or a hymn, or a specific form of poetry, such as haiku or a sonnet. Imitate the established structure of the form. Write about something meaningful to you.

2. In "Helen Todd: My Birthname," Sandra McPherson explores the fact that at birth she had a different name. Suppose you had a different name for one day — the day you were born. Choose a name. What might the person with that name have been like? Write a poem or a conversation you might have with that person, or describe that person in detail. What does that person have to say about you?

3. In "One Way She Spoke to Me," Sandra McPherson tells how her daughter arranged snails to form the greeting, "Hi!" But the snails did not stay still. The poet sees a connection between the moving snails and humans who "...are only a part / of a letter in a word. And we are on our / bellies with speech, wondering, wondering slowly, / how to move toward one another." What "word" are humans part of? Why are humans trying to move toward one another? Express your ideas in writing.

"Helen Todd: My Birthname" from *Patron Happiness* by Sandra McPherson. © 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982 by Sandra McPherson. First published by The Ecco Press in 1983. Reprinted by permission.
"Bad Mother Blues" and "One Way She Spoke to Me" from *The God of Indeterminacy* by Sandra McPherson. Copyright © 1993 by Sandra McPherson. Used with the permission of the author and of the University of Illinois Press.

Program 4: **Some Can Sing**

ROBERT HASS

"There's a sense in which poetry is not so much the writing of words as it is the movement of breath itself."

Robert Hass's poems have been influenced by the landscapes of his native California. A skilled translator of haiku, he has incorporated Buddhist notions of balance into his work. Hass has said, "If we make a poem of celebration, it has to include a lot of darkness for it to be real." He was named poet laureate of the United States in 1995, and teaches at the University of California, Berkeley.

haiku

Climb Mount Fuji,
O snail,
but slowly, slowly.

●

Even in Kyoto —
hearing the cuckoo's cry —
I long for Kyoto.

●

Napped half the day;
no one
punished me!

●

Mosquito at my ear —
does it think
I'm deaf?

●

New Year's morning —
everything is in blossom!
I feel about average.

Even with insects —
some can sing,
some can't.

●

For you fleas too
the nights must be long,
they must be lonely.

●

The snow is melting
and the village is flooded
with children.

●

Don't kill that fly!
Look — it's wringing its hands,
wringing its feet.

●

Don't worry, spiders,
I keep house
casually.

●

Hell:
Bright autumn moon;
pond snails crying
in the saucepan.

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QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT:

How do you know if you can or can't sing?

The Language of Life
with Bill Moyers

ROBERT HASS

HOUSE

Quick in the April hedge
were juncos and kinglets.
I was at the window
just now, the bacon
sizzled under hand,
the coffee steamed
fragrantly & fountains
of the Water Music
issued from another room.
Living in a house
we live in the body
of our lives, last night
the odd after-dinner light
of early spring & now
the sunlight warming or
shadowing the morning rooms.

I am conscious of being
myself the inhabitant
of certain premises:
coffee & bacon & Handel
& upstairs asleep my wife.
Very suddenly
old dusks break over me,
the thick shagged heads
of fig trees near the fence
& not wanting to go in
& swallows looping
on the darkened hill
& all that terror
in the house
& barely, only barely,
a softball
falling toward me
like a moon.

QUESTIONS

1. Which of the haiku translations on this card are your favorites? What do your favorite haiku have in common?

2. In what sense is the man at the beginning of "Song" more naked than anyone else? What happened to his clothing? How does the nakedness he experiences in the first stanza affect the way things are seen in the second stanza? How would you describe the feeling at the end of the poem?

3. In the middle of the first stanza of "House," Robert Hass describes the after-dinner light of early spring as "odd." How does his use of that term introduce a sense of uneasiness into the poem, and what suggests that he may not be completely content in his house? Why do you find the final image in the poem frightening, reassuring, or both?

SONG

Afternoon cooking in the fall sun —
who is more naked
than the man
yelling, "Hey, I'm home!"
to an empty house?
thinking because the bay is clear,
the hills in yellow heat,
& scrub oak red in gullies
that great crowds of family
should tumble from the rooms
to throw their bodies on the Papa-body,
I-am-loved

Cat sleeps in the windowgleam,
dust motes.
On the oak table
filets of sole
stewing in the juice of tangerines,
slices of green pepper
on a bone-white dish

"House" and "Song" from *Field Guide* by Robert Hass. Copyright © 1973 by Robert Hass. Reprinted by permission of Yale University Press.
"Climb Mount Fuji" and "Even in Kyoto —," by Matsuo Basho; "Napped half the day," "Mosquito at my ear —," "New Year's morning —," "Even with insects —," "For you fleas too," "The snow is melting," "Don't kill that fly!," "Don't worry, spiders," and "Hell," by Kobayashi Issa from *The Essential Haiku*, edited and translated by Robert Hass. Copyright © 1994 by Robert Hass. First published by The Ecco Press in 1994. Reprinted by permission.

ACTIVITIES

1. Robert Hass describes traditional haiku as one common image to which another image has been added. Try writing haiku — short, three-line poems — following his directions: "Direct description. No interpretation. Right now. Don't judge your feeling. The mystery is there."

2. With a group, play the game Hass plays with students in the program: Each person allows a few words to float up in response to a one-line statement about an event or an object. Then, in sequence, each person speaks the words that floated up, making a group poem.

3. Arrange the haiku on this card so as to make of them a single sequential poem. Memorize or photocopy what you do, then arrange them in an entirely new sequence and do the same. Finally, cut up one of your photocopies so that each haiku is separate. Shuffle them several times and try reading them in a random sequence.

Program 4: **Some Can Sing**

CLARIBEL ALEGRÍA

"Poetry is like bread — everybody shares it."

Claribel Alegria has lived in political exile from her homeland, El Salvador, for many years. Her poems speak of her love of her country, even as they speak of the horrors of dictatorship and death squads. She says, "It's very difficult to reconcile art and reality, but I have never thought that the poet had to be in an ivory tower thinking beautiful thoughts. When there is so much horror around you, I think you have to look at it."

DESIRE

"And someone entered death
with his eyes open."
–A. Pizarnik

I want to enter death
with my eyes open
my ears open
with no masks
no fears
knowing
and not knowing
serenely facing
other voices
other airs
other paths
forgetting my memories
detaching myself
being reborn
intact.

DESEO

"Y alguien entra a la muerte
con los ojos abiertos."
–A. Pizarnik

Quiero entrar a la muerte
con los ojos abiertos
abiertos los oídos
sin máscaras
sin miedo
sabiendo
y no sabiendo
enfrentarme serena
a otras voces
a otros aires
a otros cauces
olvidar mis recuerdos
desprenderme
nacer de nuevo
intacta.

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ARS POETICA

I,
poet by trade,
condemned so many times
to be a crow,
would never change places
with the Venus de Milo
while she reigns in the Louvre
and dies of boredom
and collects dust
I discover the sun
each morning
and amid valleys
volcanos
and debris of war
I catch sight of the promised land

ARS POETICA

Yo,
poeta de oficio,
condenada tantas veces
a ser cuervo
jamás me cambiaría
por la Venus de Milo
mientras reina en el Louvre
y se muere de tedio
y junta polvo
yo descubro el sol
todos los días
y entre valles
volcanes
y despojos de guerra
avizoro la tierra prometida

QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT:

When do you catch sight of the promised land?

CLARIBEL ALEGRÍA

DOCUMENTARY

Come, be my camera.
Let's photograph the ant heap
the queen ant
extruding sacks of coffee,
my country.
It's the harvest.
Focus on the sleeping family
cluttering the ditch.
Now, among trees:
rapid,
dark-skinned fingers
stained with honey.
Shift to a long shot:
the file of ant men
trudging down the ravine
with sacks of coffee.
A contrast:
girls in colored skirts
laugh and chatter,
filling their baskets
with berries.
Focus down.
A close-up of the pregnant mother
dozing in the hammock.
Hard focus on the flies
spattering her face.
Cut.
The terrace of polished mosaics
protected from the sun.
Maids in white aprons
nourish the ladies
who play canasta,
celebrate invasions
and feel sorry for Cuba.
Izalco sleeps
beneath the volcano's eye.
A subterranean growl
makes the village tremble.
Trucks and ox-carts
laden with sacks
screech down the slopes.
Besides coffee
they plant angels
in my country.
A chorus of children
and women
with the small white coffin
move politely aside
as the harvest passes by.
The riverside women,
naked to the waist,
wash clothing.
The truck drivers
exchange jocular obscenities
for insults.
In Panchimalco,
waiting for the ox-cart to pass by,
a peasant
with hands bound behind him
by the thumbs
and his escort of soldiers
blinks at the airplane:
a huge bee
bulging with coffee growers
and tourists.
The truck stops in the marketplace.
A panorama of iguanas,
chickens,
strips of meat,
wicker baskets,
piles of *nances*,
nísperos,
oranges,
zunzas,
zapotes,
cheeses,
bananas,
dogs, *pupusas*, *jocotes*,
acrid odors,
taffy candies,
urine puddles, tamarinds.
The virginal coffee
dances in the millhouse.
They strip her,
rape her,
lay her out on the patio
to doze in the sun.
The dark storage sheds
glimmer.
The golden coffee
sparkles with malaria,
blood,
illiteracy,
tuberculosis,
misery.
A truck roars
out of the warehouse.
It bellows uphill
drowning out the lesson:
A for alcoholism,
B for batallions,
C for corruption,
D for dictatorship,
E for exploitation,
F for the feudal power
of fourteen families
and etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.
My etcetera country,
my wounded country,
my child,
my tears,
my obsession.

QUESTIONS

1. In the English translation of "*Ars Poetica*," Claribel Alegría describes herself as "poet by trade." How does the word "trade" affect our understanding of what this poet does? Why doesn't she want to be the Venus de Milo?

2. Why do you think "Documentary" begins from the point of view of a camera? Notice that at first there are directions for the camera — "Focus," "A contrast," and "Cut" — and then the camera seems to disappear and something else takes its place. Where does this happen? Why? What takes the camera's place?

3. How would your experience of "Documentary" be different if it *started* with "the lesson," the alphabetical breakdown of issues? What is Claribel Alegría saying about El Salvador with the phrase "My etcetera country"?

ACTIVITIES

* 1. Try keeping a "seedbook" in which you write down words, sentences, thoughts, or experiences. Give yourself a time limit at first — say, two weeks — then go back through it and see if anything asks to be developed further. If so, start writing with it as your seed and see what grows.

2. Claribel Alegría describes "Desire" ("*Deseo*") as a poem that grew from a passage by Pizarnik which she had saved in her "seedbook." Place a piece of paper over the poem and then slowly slide it down, revealing one line at a time. Try to feel the stages of growth in each line. Which developments are most surprising? Which are most important?

3. Let yourself be a camera and try writing your own documentary about something for which you have deep feeling. Notice what being a camera lets you do. Notice when you have an urge to abandon the neutrality of the camera.

* May be adapted for discussing the work of other poets.

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"Documentary" from *Woman of the River*, by Claribel Alegría, translated by D.J. Flakoll. © 1989. Used by permission of the University of Pittsburgh Press.

CAROLYN FORCHÉ

"Poetry allows the human soul to speak."

Carolyn Forché has said that "poetry is the voice of the soul, whispering, celebrating, singing even." Her experiences as a human rights advocate in El Salvador inspired her to write poems that bear witness to twentieth-century atrocities and oppression. She has recently collected works by political poets around the world to keep the memory of these sufferings alive. She teaches at George Mason University.

THE COLONEL

What you have heard is true. I was in his house. His wife carried a tray of coffee and sugar. His daughter filed her nails, his son went out for the night. There were daily papers, pet dogs, a pistol on the cushion beside him. The moon swung bare on its black cord over the house. On the television was a cop show. It was in English. Broken bottles were embedded in the walls around the house to scoop the kneecaps from a man's legs or cut his hands to lace. On the windows there were gratings like those in liquor stores. We had dinner, rack of lamb, good wine, a gold bell was on the table for calling the maid. The maid brought green mangoes, salt, a type of bread. I was asked how I enjoyed the country. There was a brief commercial in Spanish. His wife took everything away. There was some talk of how difficult it had become to govern. The parrot said hello on the terrace. The colonel told it to shut up, and pushed himself from the table. My friend said to me with his eyes: say nothing. The colonel returned with a sack used to bring groceries home. He spilled many human ears on the table. They were like dried peach halves. There is no other way to say this. He took one of them in his hands, shook it in our faces, dropped it into a water glass. It came alive there. I am tired of fooling around he said. As for the rights of anyone, tell your people they can go f--- themselves. He swept the ears to the floor with his arm and held the last of his wine in the air. Something for your poetry, no? he said. Some of the ears on the floor caught this scrap of his voice. Some of the ears on the floor were pressed to the ground.

May 1978

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QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT:

What have you been given for your poetry?

CAROLYN FORCHÉ

THE MORNING BAKING

Grandma, come back, I forgot
How much lard for these rolls

Think you can put yourself in the ground
Like plain potatoes and grow in Ohio?
I am damn sick of getting fat like you

Think you can lie through your Slovak?
Tell filthy stories about the blood sausage?
Pish-pish nights at the virgin in Detroit?

I blame your raising me up for my Slav tongue
You beat me up out back, taught me to dance

I'll tell you I don't remember any kind of bread
Your wavy loaves of flesh
Stink through my sleep
The stars on your silk robes

But I'm glad I'll look when I'm old
Like a gypsy dusha hauling milk

QUESTIONS

1. Carolyn Forché says that she had "richly ambivalent" feelings about her grandmother. How are those feelings shown in "The Morning Baking"? Aside from question marks, "The Morning Baking" has no end punctuation. How does this absence affect the way you read the poem?

2. At first Carolyn Forché thought that "The Colonel" was only "a piece of a memoir, a block of memory" and not a poem at all until a friend told her that it was one of her best poems. What do you think he saw that made him so sure it was a poem? Do *you* think "The Colonel" is a poem? What makes a poem a poem?

3. In "The Colonel," Carolyn Forché attributes a universally known but seldom-printed obscenity to the colonel himself. How does the colonel's use of this term affect our understanding of what he is talking about? Is the term more obscene than what he is saying in conjunction with it? What do *you* think is most obscene in this poem?

POEM FOR MAYA

Dipping our bread in oil tins
we talked of morning peeling
open our rooms to a moment
of almonds, olives and wind
when we did not yet know what we were
The days in Mallorca were alike
footprints down goat-paths
from the beds we had left
at night the stars locked to darkness
At that time we were learning
to dance, take our clothes
in our fingers and open
ourselves to their hands
The *tramontana* was with us
For a month the almond trees bloomed
their droppings the delicate silks
we removed when each time a touch
took us closer to the window where
we whispered *us*, there on the intricate
balconies of breath, overlooking
the rest of our lives

ACTIVITIES

1. Think of a person about whom you are "richly ambivalent." Understanding that this person will not see what you are writing and without pausing to reflect, write what you love, like, fear, hate, are ashamed of, are proud of, envy, or admire about this person. Describe what you have learned about this person, yourself, or your relationship.

2. List some of the skills you learned from a parent, teacher, or older friend. Do you still associate those activities with those people? Explain why or why not. Which skills do you most regret *not* learning?

3. In "The Colonel," Carolyn Forché was warned with a glance not to say anything. She held her tongue but later found it necessary to say something about her dinner with the colonel. Try writing a precisely detailed description of an experience which you need to remember partly because you could not speak at the time.

4. "The Morning Baking" and "Poem for Maya" seem to represent different stages in a young woman's life, and learning to dance figures in both poems. Alone or with a small group find music appropriate for the dancing in each poem.

* May be adapted for discussing the work of other poets.

"The Morning Baking" from *Gathering the Tribes* by Carolyn Forché. Copyright © 1976 by Carolyn Forché. Reprinted by permission of Yale University Press.
"Poem for Maya" from *The Country Between Us* by Carolyn Forché. Copyright © 1981 by Carolyn Forché. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.
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Program 5: **Here in the Mind**

GARY SNYDER

"The earliest hominid being we can touch comes out in poetry. It's the way natural systems work."

Gary Snyder grew up in northern Washington. In college, he found academic writing limiting and was drawn to writing poetry because "There are things you cannot say except in poetry, and those are the things I need to say." Originally a member of the Beat movement, his poetry often reflects his practice of Zen Buddhism. He lives in the Yuba River watershed of the northern Sierra Nevada and teaches at the University of California, Davis.

HOW POETRY COMES TO ME

It comes blundering over the
Boulders at night, it stays
Frightened outside the
Range of my campfire
I go to meet it at the
Edge of the light

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FOR ALL

Ah to be alive
on a mid-September morn
fording a stream
barefoot, pants rolled up,
holding boots, pack on,
sunshine, ice in the shallows,
northern rockies.

Rustle and shimmer of icy creek waters
stones turn underfoot, small and hard as toes
cold nose dripping
singing inside
creek music, heart music,
smell of sun on gravel.

I pledge allegiance

I pledge allegiance to the soil
of Turtle Island,
and to the beings who thereon dwell
one ecosystem
in diversity
under the sun
With joyful interpenetration for all.

QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT:

To what do you pledge allegiance?

GARY SNYDER

AXE HANDLES

One afternoon the last week in April
Showing Kai how to throw a hatchet
One-half turn and it sticks in a stump.
He recalls the hatchet-head
Without a handle, in the shop
And go gets it, and wants it for his own.
A broken-off axe handle behind the door
Is long enough for a hatchet,
We cut it to length and take it
With the hatchet head
And working hatchet, to the wood block.
There I begin to shape the old handle
With the hatchet, and the phrase
First learned from Ezra Pound
Rings in my ears!
"When making an axe handle
the pattern is not far off."
And I say this to Kai
"Look: We'll shape the handle
By checking the handle
Of the axe we cut with —"
And he sees. And I hear it again:
It's in Lu Ji's *Wèn Fu*, fourth century
A.D. "Essay on Literature"— in the
Preface: "In making the handle
Of an axe
By cutting wood with an axe
The model is indeed near at hand."
My teacher Shih-hsiang Chen
Translated that and taught it years ago
And I see: Pound was an axe,
Chen was an axe, I am an axe
And my son a handle, soon
To be shaping again, model
And tool, craft of culture,
How we go on.

HAY FOR THE HORSES

He had driven half the night
From far down San Joaquin
Through Mariposa, up the
Dangerous mountain roads,
And pulled in at eight a.m.
With his big truckload of hay
behind the barn.
With winch and ropes and hooks
We stacked the bales up clean
To splintery redwood rafters
High in the dark, flecks of alfalfa
Whirling through shingle-cracks of light,
Itch of haydust in the
sweaty shirt and shoes.
At lunchtime under Black oak
Out in the hot corral,
—The old mare nosing lunchpails,
Grasshoppers crackling in the weeds —
"I'm sixty-eight," he said,
"I first bucked hay when I was seventeen
I thought, that day I started,
I sure would hate to do this all my life
And dammit, that's just what
I've gone and done."

QUESTIONS

1. How is poetry like a wild animal in "How Poetry Comes to Me"? What ideas does the poem give you about writing poems?

2. In "Axe Handles" and "Hay for the Horses," Gary Snyder observes and celebrates people who work with their hands. Relate "The Man Who Makes Brooms" by poet Naomi Shihab Nye to the two poems by Snyder. What virtues do the poets find in work? Why might work inspire poems?

3. In "For All," Gary Snyder refers to Turtle Island, a Native-American term for the North American continent that expresses kinship with nature. How does Snyder make you aware of this idea in his poem?

4. Many of Gary Synder's poems focus on nature and the environment. What meaning does his poetry have for people in today's crowded cities?

ACTIVITIES

1. In "Axe Handles," Gary Snyder describes something he's learned from someone else and how he's passing it on to his son. Describe something valuable that you've learned from someone else. How did you learn it? How would you pass it on?

2. Gary Snyder says, "You have to be relaxed with language and goofy with it." Follow Snyder's advice. Let your imagination run wild for a few minutes, writing down whatever occurs to you. Afterward, follow Snyder's advice to "throw away the excess" and find a shape for what you've written. Perhaps what you wrote is a poem.

"How Poetry Comes to Me," "Axe Handles," "Hay for the Horses," and "For All" from *No Nature: New and Selected Poems* by Gary Snyder, copyright © 1992 by Gary Snyder. Reprinted by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

Program 5: **Here in the Mind**

DAISY ZAMORA

"I cannot imagine how other people live without poetry, because for me poetry is a way of living my life, a way of feeling life."

Daisy Zamora was active in the National Sandinista Liberation Front that overthrew the dictator of her native Nicaragua in 1979. Afterwards, she served as vice minister of culture and returned to writing poetry about family relations and the lives of women in her country. Zamora believes that poetry is important because "you can build bridges among human beings." A well-known painter and psychologist, she teaches literature at the Universidad Centroamericana in Managua, Nicaragua.

MOTHER'S DAY

— To my children

I do not doubt you would have liked
one of those pretty mothers in the ads:
complete with adoring husband and happy children.
She's always smiling, and if she cries at all
it is absent of lights and camera,
makeup washed from her face.

But since you were born of my womb, I should tell you:
ever since I was small like you
I wanted to be myself — and for a woman that's hard —
(even my Guardian Angel refused to watch over me
when she heard).

I cannot tell you that I know the road.
Often I lose my way
and my life has been a painful crossing
navigating reefs, in and out of storms,
refusing to listen to the ghostly sirens
who invite me into the past,
neither compass nor binnacle to show me the way.

But I advance,
go forward holding to the hope
of some distant port
where you, my children — I'm sure —
will pull in one day
after I've been lost at sea.

DÍA DE LAS MADRES

— A mis hijos

No dudo que les hubiera gustado tener
una linda mamá de anuncio comercial:
con marido adorable y niños felices.
Siempre aparece risueña — y si algún día llora —
lo hace una vez apagados reflectores y cámaras
y con el rostro limpio de maquillaje.

Pero ya que nacieron de mí, debo decirles:
Desde que era pequeña como ustedes
ansiaba ser yo misma — y para una mujer eso es difícil —
(Hasta mi Angel Guardián renunció a cuidarme
cuando lo supo).

No puedo asegurarles que conozco bien el rumbo.
Muchas veces me equivoco,
y mi vida más bien ha sido como una dolorosa travesía
vadeando escollos, sorteando tempestades,
desoyendo fantasmales sirenas que me invitan al pasado,
sin brújula ni bitácora adecuadas
que me indiquen la ruta.

Pero avanzo, avanzo aferrada a la esperanza
de algún puerto lejano
al que ustedes, hijos míos — estoy segura —
arribarán una mañana
— después de consumado
mi naufragio —.

QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT:

What is the "myself" that you want to be?

DAISY ZAMORA

LOYAL HOUSEWIFE

Everything ended with the Honeymoon
the orange blossoms, the love letters,
the childish weeping.

Now you crawl at your master's feet
first in his harem
taken or abandoned according to his will
Mother of children who bear his name
bemoaning your lot
beside a clothesline heavy with diapers
wringing your heart
until it is purified in sheets and towels.
Accustomed to the shouts, the humiliation
of a hand held out for crumbs.
A woman cornered, a plaintive shadow
suffering migraines, varicose veins, diabetes.

A young girl kept for show
who married her first boyfriend
and grew old listening to the distant song of life
from her place of wifely honor.

TO BE A WOMAN

Having been born a woman
means placing your body at the service of others
giving your time to others
thinking only in terms of others.

Having been born a woman
means that your body is not yours
your time is not yours
your thoughts do not belong to you.

Being born a woman
is being born into nothingness.
If it weren't that your body-home
insures the continuance of the species
you might as well not have been born.

To be born a woman
is to come to nothing,
to a life you do not inhabit
in which everyone else — not your own heart —
determines and decides.

To be born a woman
is to be at the bottom of the well, the moat,
the pit that surrounds the walled city
where They live, They alone: those
you are called to admire, trick, charm,
humiliating and selling yourself.
You must swim against all currents,
rebel, fight, and scream
until you can push boulders apart
and slip out through the crack,
destroying the draw bridge, tearing down the walls,
making it to the moat and crossing the chasm,
leaping without wings from the precipice
impelled only by your heart
sustained only by your mind
until you have liberated yourself
from the nothingness you will only conquer
with your woman's voice, your verb.

QUESTIONS

1. In "Loyal Housewife" and "To Be a Woman," Daisy Zamora describes her view of the lives of women in Nicaragua. What did you learn about the lives of these women? What feelings did the poems stir up in you? Is this experience of women the same as in your country?

2. In "Mother's Day" Daisy Zamora explores the struggle she is experiencing between the role her culture has imposed on her and her desire to "be myself." How do you think she is doing in that struggle? Explain.

3. Daisy Zamora says that her poems "were all I had to survive by" if she were killed while fighting in the Nicaraguan revolution. What would you like to be remembered by?

4. In "Mother's Day," Daisy Zamora apologizes for not being like "one of those pretty mothers in the ads..." How do you think media images affect people's feelings about themselves?

ACTIVITIES

1. Find out more about the revolution in Nicaragua. What were the opposing sides? What were the central issues? What was the outcome? How did Violeta Chamorro's rise to power fulfill some of the aspirations expressed in "To Be a Woman"?

2. Daisy Zamora says that she thinks of baseball and poetry as the two national sports of Nicaragua because they are both so popular. Plan an event or activity that could increase the popularity of poetry in your neighborhood or school.

3. Daisy Zamora uses photographs of women in her family to try to learn more about them. Find a photograph of someone you are curious about. What questions would you ask that person? Find out as much as you can. Then write a poem that expresses what you've learned and how you feel about the person.

"Loyal Housewife," "Mother's Day," and "To Be a Woman" from Daisy Zamora's *Clean Slate* (Curbstone Press, 1993). Copyright © 1993 by Daisy Zamora. Translation copyright © 1993 by Margaret Randall and Elinor Randall. Reprinted with permission of Curbstone Press.

Program 6: **Swirl Like a Leaf**

JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA

"When you work at a poem long enough — if you just do that one poem and don't worry about anything else — then the imagery of one verse line exudes a sparkling fountain of energy that fills your spirit."

Born in New Mexico of Chicano and Apache descent, Jimmy Santiago Baca's life on the streets led to a maximum security prison, where he learned to read and write. His poems are witness to spiritual rebirth. He says, "in the most difficult of circumstances after working on the poem. . . I feel that, whatever wall there is in front of me, I will go right through it." He founded Black Mesa Enterprises in Albuquerque to offer young people alternatives to violence.

CLOUDY DAY

It is windy today. A wall of wind crashes against,
windows clunk against, iron frames
as wind swings past broken glass
and seethes, like a frightened cat
in empty spaces of the cellblock.

In the exercise yard
we sat huddled in our prison jackets,
on our haunches against the fence,
and the wind carried our words
over the fence,
while the vigilant guard on the tower
held his cap at the sudden gust.

I could see the main tower from where I sat,
and the wind in my face
gave me the feeling I could grasp
the tower like a cornstalk,
and snap it from its roots of rock.

The wind plays it like a flute,
this hollow shoot of rock.
The brim girded with barbwire
with a guard sitting there also,
listening intently to the sounds
as clouds cover the sun.

I thought of the day I was coming to prison,
in the back seat of a police car,
hands and ankles chained, the policeman pointed,
"See that big water tank? The big
silver one out there, sticking up?
That's the prison."

And here I am, I cannot believe it.
Sometimes it is such a dream, a dream,
where I stand up in the face of the wind,
like now, it blows at my jacket,
and my eyelids flick a little bit,
while I stare disbelieving . . . .

The third day of spring,
and four years later, I can tell you,
how a man can endure, how a man
can become so cruel, how he can die
or become so cold. I can tell you this,
I have seen it every day, every day,
and still I am strong enough to love you,
love myself and feel good;
even as the earth shakes and trembles,
and I have not a thing to my name,
I feel as if I have everything, everything.

I APPLIED FOR THE BOARD

a flight of fancy and breath of fresh air
Is worth all the declines in the world.
It was funny though when I strode into the Board
And presented myself before the Council
With my shaggy-haired satchel, awiry
With ends of shoestrings and guitar strings
Holding it together, brimming with poems.

I was ready for my first grand, eloquent
Booming reading of a few of my poems —
When the soft, surprised eyes
Of the chairman looked at me and said no.

And his two colleagues sitting on each side of him,
Peered at me through bluemetal eyes like rifle scopes.
And I like a deer in the forest heard the fresh,
Crisp twig break under my cautious feet,
As they surrounded me with quiet questions,
Closing in with grim sour looks, until I heard
The final shot burst from their mouths
That I had not made it, and felt the warm blood
Gush forth in my breast, partly from the wound
And partly from the joy that it was over.

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QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT:

What kind of satchel do you carry your poems in?

JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA

EL GATO (excerpt)

Twelve years old. Gato is no good,
dime bagging Peruvian flakes,
inhaling a glue rag.
With all your police and prison sentences,
you can't chase Gato from the street
or stop him from selling drugs,
because in his square white paper
lives God — Gato deals God — who gives reprieve
from earthly hell and makes him feel good,
gives him hope and self-esteem,
and transforms years of despair
to a moment's cocaine-heaven,
when all he has is darkness,
until he's killed or od's like homeboys
trashed on stacks of county jail corpses,
who understood life was a sewer grate
their dignity poured down with discarded litter.

Crack is God, crack creates light
when hopeless days bury Gato under
rock piles of despair,
blocking him from feeling any more,
breaking his heart into pieces of NOTHING.
Gato is no good and preaches NOTHING door to door,
a strong kid full of NOTHING,
from NOTHING does he ask a blessing,
to NOTHING does he pray, hopes NOTHING
forgives his wrongs and NOTHING
helps when he takes vengeance on us.

QUESTIONS

1. How does the weather affect the feelings expressed in "Cloudy Day"? What's the effect of the season in "Cloudy Day"?

2. Why has "NOTHING" become the center of life for Gato at twelve years old? Considering the language used to describe him at age twelve, what do you think his future could hold for him?

3. What kinds of power are represented in "El Gato" and "I Applied for the Board"? How would you describe the power that ultimately prevails in each instance?

4. "I Applied for the Board" describes an appearance before a parole board. Why does the chairman refuse to listen to the applicant's poems? Why are the board members' "quiet questions" so devastating?

"Cloudy Day" and "I Applied for the Board" from *Immigrants In Our Own Land and Selected Early Poems*. Copyright © 1982 by Jimmy Santiago Baca. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.
"El Gato" (excerpt) copyright © 1995 by Jimmy Santiago Baca. Reprinted by permission of Jimmy Santiago Baca.

ACTIVITIES

* 1. Using photographic collage, mixed-media sculpture, drawing, or painting, create a visual complement to "El Gato" or "I Applied for the Board." Organize a display of these works of art.

2. Write about a "cloudy day" in your own life, following the full range of your feelings.

* 3. Compose or find music that you would like to hear with the words of "El Gato" in the passage on this card. Play this music with Baca's reading of this passage, then play it with your own reading. Arrange a listening session during which everyone offers the results of their efforts.

4. With three other people, act out or mime the scene described in "I Applied for the Board" by taking turns as the prisoner/poet, the chairman, and his two colleagues.

* May be adapted for discussing the work of other poets.

Program 6: **Swirl Like a Leaf**

MARILYN CHIN

"I believe I have a mission, and that I have many stories to tell on many levels — on a personal level, on the familial level, and on the historical-social level."

Marilyn Chin is a writer who straddles two cultures. A first-generation Chinese American born in Hong Kong and raised in Portland, Oregon, she writes often about the conditions of exile, assimilation, and loss. Her poetry has been hailed for addressing the subjugation of Asian women in patriarchal societies. About poetry, Chin says, "You know you are a poet when you can't live without it." She teaches at San Diego State University.

TURTLE SOUP

You go home one evening tired from work,
and your mother boils you turtle soup.
Twelve hours hunched over the hearth
(who knows what else is in that cauldron).

You say, "Ma, you've poached the symbol of long life,
that turtle lived four thousand years, swam
the Wei, up the Yellow, over the Yangtze.
Witnessed the Bronze Age, the High Tang,
grazed on splendid sericulture."
(So, she boils the life out of him.)

"All our ancestors have been fools.
Remember Uncle Wu who rode ten thousand miles
to kill a famous Manchu and ended up
with his head on a pole? Eat, child,
its liver will make you strong."

"Sometimes you're the life, sometimes the sacrifice."
Her sobbing is inconsolable.
So, you spread that gentle napkin
over your lap in decorous Pasadena.

Baby, some high priestess has got it wrong.
The golden decal on the green underbelly
says "Made in Hong Kong."

Is there nothing left but the shell
and humanity's strange inscriptions,
the songs, the rites, the oracles?

for Ben Huang

THE FLORAL APRON

The woman wore a floral apron around her neck,
that woman from my mother's village
with a sharp cleaver in her hand.
She said, "What shall we cook tonight?
Perhaps these six tiny squid
lined up so perfectly on the block?"

She wiped her hand on the apron,
pierced the blade into the first.
There was no resistance,
no blood, only cartilage
soft as a child's nose. A last
iota of ink made us wince.

Suddenly, the aroma of ginger and scallion fogged our senses,
and we absolved her for that moment's barbarism.
Then, she, an elder of the tribe,
without formal headdress, without elegance,
deigned to teach the younger
about the Asian plight.

And although we have traveled far
we would never forget that primal lesson
— on patience, courage, forbearance,
on how to love squid despite squid,
how to honor the village, the tribe,
that floral apron.

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QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT:

How have you honored that floral apron?

The Language of Life with Bill Moyers

MARILYN CHIN

WHERE WE LIVE NOW (II)

Herewith, snapshots of myself —
standing, sitting, reclining
on the new chaise lounge —

taken with my family at Easter:
with mother, sisters and brother
while father is away at war

with his personal desires and losses.
He, too, sends a photograph
of himself and an unnamed woman.

Notice the cryptic message,
"business as busy as usual,
and the woman is only temporary."

Such a typical American story,
but it wouldn't hurt to recognize —
she was white and very beautiful.

"Where We Live Now (II)" from *Dwarf Bamboo* by Marilyn Chin, copyright © 1987 by Marilyn Chin. Published by Greenfield Review Press. Reprinted by permission of the author.
"The Floral Apron," "Prelude," and "Turtle Soup" were published in *The Phoenix Gone, The Terrace Empty* by Marilyn Chin (Milkweed Editions, 1994). Copyright © 1994 by Marilyn Chin. Reprinted with permission from Milkweed Editions.

QUESTIONS

1. Who seems more concerned with preserving the culture of China in "Turtle Soup," the daughter or the mother? Who says, " 'Sometimes you're the life, sometimes the sacrifice' "? Whose sobbing is inconsolable? Why?
2. In "The Floral Apron," what is "the Asian plight" which this elder of the tribe teaches the younger? What is meant by "to love squid, despite squid"?
3. In what way does "Where We Live Now (II)" tell "such a typical American story"? What do the poem's final two lines add to that story?
4. "Prelude" suggests that "your country" exists apart from you in the world and also within you. What part of your country exists within you? How would the poem change if "country" were replaced by "nation"?

PRELUDE

To love your country
is to know its beginnings
not with the bald-face moon
or the complacent river —
but here within you.

Your heart is a house —
I /we are its inhabitants.
Although the country is lost
rivers and mountains remain.
And we shall always live
in this poetry that you love.

for my mother,
Wong Yuet Kuen

ACTIVITIES

1. Imagine that you had to leave forever the place in which you presently live. List the aspects of that place which you would most regret losing. List the aspects you think you could somehow take with you. In a small group, compare your lists.
2. Among other things, "The Floral Apron" seems to honor women. Study the role of women in keeping traditions alive in your culture and write a tribute to these women.
3. Describe a kind of food particularly important in your family. Write down all the emotional and spiritual qualities associated with that food. Describe exactly how it should be prepared and how and when it should be served. In a poem honor the place of this food in your home and family.
4. Alone or with a small group, research the initial experiences on this continent of an immigrant group, perhaps your own family. Compare what you have discovered with what others have learned about different groups.

ROBERT BLY

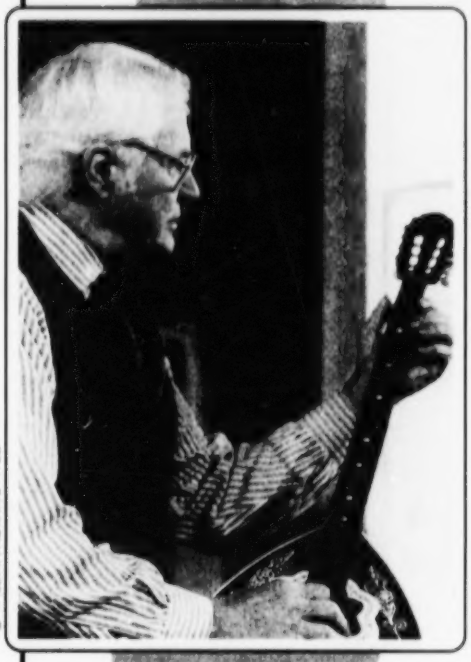
"It's important that the words in your poems be those you could speak to your friends."

Robert Bly has devoted much of his creativity as a poet, translator, and critic to helping people connect poetry to their emotional lives. Throughout his career he has emphasized poetry as a moral force in public affairs and a healing influence in individual lives. He has said, "Poetry requires many, many years of struggling to understand what is the natural voice." He lives in Moose Lake, Minnesota, and travels widely to teach and conduct workshops.

A DREAM OF RETARDED CHILDREN

That afternoon I had been fishing alone,
Strong wind, some water slopping in the back of the boat.
I was far from home.
Later I woke several times hearing geese.
I dreamt I saw retarded children playing, and one came near,
And her teacher, face open, hair light.
For the first time I forgot my distance;
I took her in my arms and held her.

Waking up, I felt how alone I was.
I walked on the dock,
Fishing alone in the far north.



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A THIRD BODY

A man and a woman sit near each other, and they do not long
at this moment to be older, or younger, nor born
in any other nation, or time, or place.
They are content to be where they are, talking or not-talking.
Their breaths together feed someone whom we do not know.
The man sees the way his fingers move;
he sees her hands close around a book she hands to him.
They obey a third body that they share in common.
They have made a promise to love that body.
Age may come, parting may come, death will come.
A man and a woman sit near each other;
as they breathe they feed someone we do not know,
someone we know of, whom we have never seen.

QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT:

When did you last forget *your* distance?

ROBERT BLY

THE FACE IN THE TOYOTA

Suppose you see a face in a Toyota
One day, and fall in love with that face.
And it is Her, and the world rushes by
Like dust blown down a Montana street.

And you fall upward into some deep hole.
And you can't tell God from a grain of sand.
And your life is changed, except that you now
Overlook even more than you did before.

And these ignored things come to bury you.
And you are crushed, and your parents
Can't help anymore, and the woman in the Toyota
Becomes a part of the world that you don't see.

And now the grain of sand becomes sand again.
And you stand on some mountain road weeping.

QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe the physical situation in which you might "see a face in a Toyota"? What could be especially attractive about that situation? What could be especially deceptive about it? Why and how does "the woman in the Toyota" become "a part of the world that you don't see"?

2. How would you describe the "distance" felt by the speaker in "A Dream of Retarded Children"? How does the presence of the children's teacher affect his "distance"?

3. Practice saying the poem "It's Hard for Some Men to Finish Sentences" with long pauses where the dots appear. This poem seems to describe a weakness among men, but what could be the advantages of not finishing sentences?

IT'S HARD FOR SOME MEN TO FINISH SENTENCES

Sometimes a man can't say
What he . . . A wind comes
And his doors don't rattle. Rain
Comes and his hair is dry.

There's a lot to keep inside
And a lot to . . . Sometimes shame
Means we. . . Children are cruel,
He's six and his hands. . .

Even Hamlet kept passing
The king praying
And the king said,
"There was something. . . ."

ACTIVITIES

1. Alone or with a small group, write several deliberately incomplete sentences, noting how it feels to stop short of completeness; then try to arrange them in a sequence which feels complete.

* 2. Keep a dream journal for two weeks, recording each day the details of the dreams you remember. Then write out the details of a dream which especially surprised you.

3. Research the ways in which, historically, our society has treated people considered developmentally impaired. Is it possible you treat yourself this way? Learn how other human societies have treated such people. Discuss what "A Dream of Retarded Children" tells us about our friendships and own society.

* May be adapted for discussing the work of other poets.

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"A Third Body" from *Loving a Woman in Two Worlds* by Robert Bly, copyright © 1985, Doubleday, 1985.
"The Face in the Toyota," originally published in *The Sun* magazine, Chapel Hill, N.C., 1994. Reprinted by permission of the author.
"It's Hard for Some Men to Finish Sentences," reprinted by permission of the author.

Program 7: **The Heart of Things**

ADRIENNE RICH

"Poetry can bring together those parts of us which exist in dread and those which have the surviving sense of a possible happiness, collectivity, community, a loss of isolation."

As a poet, feminist thinker, and political activist, Adrienne Rich addresses the dislocation of the world, especially the divorce of the private and public. Rich says, "I intend to go on trying to be part of what I think of as an underground stream — of voices resisting the voices that tell us we are nothing." A major figure in American letters for a generation, she is the recipient of many awards for poems and essays that bring a piercing candor to human relationships.

FROM "AN ATLAS OF THE DIFFICULT WORLD"
(DEDICATIONS)

I know you are reading this poem
late, before leaving your office
of the one intense yellow lamp-spot and the darkening window
in the lassitude of a building faded to quiet
long after rush-hour. I know you are reading this poem
standing up in a bookstore far from the ocean
on a grey day of early spring, faint flakes driven
across the plains' enormous spaces around you.
I know you are reading this poem
in a room where too much has happened for you to bear
where the bedclothes lie in stagnant coils on the bed
and the open valise speaks of flight
but you cannot leave yet. I know you are reading this poem
as the underground train loses momentum and before running
up the stairs
toward a new kind of love
your life has never allowed.
I know you are reading this poem by the light
of the television screen where soundless images jerk and slide
while you wait for the newscast from the *intifada*.
I know you are reading this poem in a waiting-room
of eyes met and unmeeting, of identity with strangers.
I know you are reading this poem by fluorescent light
in the boredom and fatigue of the young who are counted out,
count themselves out, at too early an age. I know
you are reading this poem through your failing sight, the thick
lens enlarging these letters beyond all meaning yet you read on
because even the alphabet is precious.
I know you are reading this poem as you pace beside the stove
warming milk, a crying child on your shoulder, a book in your
hand
because life is short and you too are thirsty.
I know you are reading this poem which is not in your language
guessing at some words while others keep you reading
and I want to know which words they are.
I know you are reading this poem listening for something, torn
between bitterness and hope
turning back once again to the task you cannot refuse.
I know you are reading this poem because there is nothing else
left to read
there where you have landed, stripped as you are.

1990-1991

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QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT:

What are the circumstances in which you are reading this poem?

ADRIENNE RICH

IN THOSE YEARS

In those years, people will say, we lost track
of the meaning of *we*, of *you*
we found ourselves
reduced to *I*
and the whole thing became
silly, ironic, terrible:
we were trying to live a personal life
and yes, that was the only life
we could bear witness to

But the great dark birds of history screamed and plunged
into our personal weather
They were headed somewhere else but their beaks and pinions drove
along the shore, through the rags of fog
where we stood, saying *I*

1991

IN A CLASSROOM

Talking of poetry, hauling the books
arm-full to the table where the heads
bend or gaze upward, listening, reading aloud,
talking of consonants, elision,
caught in the how, oblivious of why:
I look in your face, Jude,
neither frowning nor nodding,
opaque in the slant of dust-motes over the table:
a presence like a stone, if a stone were thinking
What I cannot say, is me. For that I came.

1986

PROSPECTIVE IMMIGRANTS PLEASE NOTE

Either you will
go through this door
or you will not go through

If you go through
there is always the risk
of remembering your name

Things look at you doubly
and you must look back
and let them happen

If you do not go through
it is possible
to live worthily

to maintain your attitudes
to hold your position
to die bravely

but much will blind you,
much will evade you
at what cost who knows?

The door itself
makes no promises
It is only a door

1962

QUESTIONS

1. Adrienne Rich has said that "Prospective Immigrants Please Note" could be about moving into any new experience. What could it mean to "remember your name"? What does "Things look at you doubly" suggest to you?

2. How do the conditions of lives of people you know relate to some of the life situations named in "Dedications"?

3. In "In Those Years" who do you imagine as the "people" who are saying all this? What do "the great dark birds of history" mean to you? How would end punctuation change your experience of this poem?

ACTIVITIES

1. If you know a language other than English, try translating one or a part of one of these poems into that language. (This could also be a group project.) How does the poem change?

2. Alone or with a small group, create a mural depicting the multiplicity and inclusiveness of "Dedications."

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Program 7: **The Heart of Things**

VICTOR HERNÁNDEZ CRUZ

"Poetry gives us revelations, flashes, which illuminate those things which were mysterious to us."

Victor Hernández Cruz infuses his poetry with the rhythms, colors, and textures of Puerto Rico, his homeland, and the Lower East Side of New York City, where he grew up. Cruz says, "I write about myself as a Caribbean man, a man within a larger tapestry; and I try to see the connections between everything — between myself and history." Cruz has taught most recently at the University of California in San Diego.

today is a day of great joy

when they stop poems
in the mail & clap
their hands & dance to
them

when women become pregnant
by the side of poems
the strongest sounds making
the river go along

it is a great day

as poems fall down to
movie crowds in restaurants
in bars

when poems start to
knock down walls to
choke politicians
when poems scream &
begin to break the air

that is the time of
true poets that is
the time of greatness

a true poet aiming
poems & watching things
fall to the ground

it is a great day

YJUANAS

There's not an ijuana that isn't drawn up
First on ocean sea shell tinges of color,
Some with splashes of azulie and pinks,
Round their waist a Matisse of blue,
Achiote feet crawling out of topaz sand dunes,
Umbrellas of crimson amapolas,
Despite the Yankees a grace from Areyto singing,
Right through all malfunction
A motion takes transport in quiro circles,
If life left society
The singers claim there are ears
Alive in river rocks by night and day
From which Yjuanas gowns
Dive towards baptism
Legs scrambling through waterfalls,
What the eyes of the bamboo flute see,
A reptile sees
Ijuanas Picture
A place that can never be told in words.

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QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT:

What would you aim your poems at?

VICTOR HERNÁNDEZ CRUZ

PROBLEMS WITH HURRICANES

A campesino looked at the air
And told me:
With hurricanes it's not the wind
or the noise or the water.
I'll tell you he said:
it's the mangoes, avocados
Green plantains and bananas
flying into town like projectiles.

How would your family
feel if they had to tell
The generations that you
got killed by a flying
Banana.

Death by drowning has honor
If the wind picked you up
and slammed you
Against a mountain boulder
This would not carry shame
But
to suffer a mango smashing
Your skull
or a plantain hitting your
Temple at 70 miles per hour
is the ultimate disgrace.

The campesino takes off his hat—
As a sign of respect
towards the fury of the wind
And says:
Don't worry about the noise
Don't worry about the water
Don't worry about the wind—

If you are going out
beware of mangoes
And all such beautiful
sweet things.

QUESTIONS

1. How *would* your family feel if they had to tell the generations that you got killed by a flying banana? What is the special danger posed by "all such beautiful / sweet things"?

2. The person who describes the problems with hurricanes is a campesino. How would the poem change if that person were an investment banker, a nurse, or a carpenter?

3. "Yjuanas" evokes the world of the indigenous Taino people of Puerto Rico whose language, Arawak, is now dead. What do you find most memorable about that world? What is most important to you about that world?

4. What is great about the day in "today is a day of great joy"? Who would welcome such a day? Who would dread such a day? In what ways could it be a great day for you?

"today is a day of great joy" and "Yjuanas" copyright © 1995 by Victor Hernández Cruz. Reprinted by permission of the author.
"Problems with Hurricanes" first appeared in *Red Beans* by Victor Hernández Cruz, Coffee House Press, 1991. Reprinted by permission of the publisher. Copyright © 1991 by Victor Hernández Cruz.

ACTIVITIES

1. Pick another great natural force — for example, an earthquake, a hailstorm, or a flood — and look at it the way the campesino looks at hurricanes. Write a poem "Problems with _____."

2. Alone or with a small group, find out all you can about the Taino people — where, when, and how they lived; their cultural practices; and what became of them. Then tell their story to a larger group.

3. The invented word "ijuana" brings together "iguana," a tropical reptile, and "Juana," the common Spanish name of a woman. Alone or with a small group, create a mural which illustrates your experience of the poem "Yjuanas" and which also responds to the poem's final line: "A place that can never be told in words."

4. Our word "hurricane" comes from the Taino's word *hurakán*. Look up the meaning of this word in Arawak and trace the word's evolution, including our modern custom of naming hurricanes.

Program 7: **The Heart of Things**

MICHAEL S. HARPER

"The job of the poet is to tell the truth no matter what."

Michael S. Harper is a native of Brooklyn, New York, and the first poet laureate of Rhode Island. His mother taught him to read before kindergarten. Long influenced by the oral traditions of jazz and the blues, his poems are rhythmic compositions intended for the voice. On the discipline needed for writing poetry, he says, "The musicians of my era taught me you have to pay your dues willingly, and you have to pay them up front." He teaches at Brown University.

A MOTHER SPEAKS:
THE ALGIERS MOTEL INCIDENT, DETROIT

It's too dark to see black
in the windows of Woodward
or Virginia Park.
The undertaker
pushed his body back
into place
with plastic and gum
but it wouldn't
hold water.
When I looked
for marks
or lineament
or fine stitching
I was led away
without seeing
this plastic
face they'd built
that was not my son's.
They tied the eye
torn out
by shotgun
into place
and his shattered
arm cut away
with his buttocks
that remained.
My son's gone
by white hands
though he said
to his last word —
"Oh I'm so sorry,
officer, I broke your gun."

REUBEN, REUBEN

I reach from pain
to music great enough
to bring me back,
swollenhead, madness,
lovefruit, a pickle of hate
so sour my mouth twicked
up and would not sing;
there's nothing in the beat
to hold it in
melody and turn human skin:
a brown berry gone
to rot just two days on the branch:
we've lost a son,
the music, *jazz*, comes in.

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QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT:

What music is great enough to bring you back?

MICHAEL S. HARPER

DEAR JOHN, DEAR COLTRANE

a love supreme, a love supreme
a love supreme, a love supreme

Sex fingers toes
in the marketplace
near your father's church
in Hamlet, North Carolina —
witness to this love
in this calm fallow
of these minds,
there is no substitute for pain:
genitals gone or going,
seed burned out,
you tuck the roots in the earth,
turn back, and move
by river through the swamps,
singing: *a love supreme, a love supreme;*
what does it all mean?
Loss, so great each black
woman expects your failure
in mute change, the seed gone.
You plod up into the electric city —
your song now crystal and
the blues. You pick up the horn
with some will and blow
into the freezing night:
a love supreme, a love supreme —

Dawn comes and you cook
up the thick sin 'tween
impotence and death, fuel
the tenor sax cannibal
heart, genitals and sweat
that makes you clean —
a love supreme, a love supreme —

Why you so black?
cause I am
why you so funky?
cause I am
why you so black?
cause I am
why you so sweet?
cause I am
why you so black?
cause I am
a love supreme, a love supreme:

So sick
you couldn't play *Naima,*
so flat we ached
for song you'd concealed
with your own blood,
your diseased liver gave
out its purity,
the inflated heart
pumps out, the tenor kiss,
tenor love:
a love supreme, a love supreme —
a love supreme, a love supreme —

QUESTIONS

1. How does music help to deal with grief in "Reuben, Reuben"? What is "music great enough"? Why does "the music, *jazz*" come at the end of the poem?

2. "Nightmare Begins Responsibility" is a poem about the loss of an infant son. Why does distrust figure so prominently in this poem? How *does* nightmare begin responsibility?

NIGHTMARE BEGINS RESPONSIBILITY

I place these numbed wrists to the pane
watching white uniforms whisk over
him in the tube-kept
prison
fear what they will do in experiment
watch my gloved stickshifting gasolined hands
breathe *boxcar-information-please* infirmary tubes
distrusting white-pink mending paperthin
silkened end hairs, distrusting tubes
shrunk in his *trunk-skincapped*
shaven-head, in thighs
distrusting-white-hands-picking-baboon-light
on this son who will not make his second night
of this wardstrewn intensive airpocket
where his father's asthmatic
hymns of *night-train*, train done gone
his mother can only know that he has flown
up into essential calm unseen corridor
going boxscarred home, *mamaborn, sweetsonchild*
gonedowntown into *researchtestingwarehousebatteryacid*
mama-son-done-gone/me telling her 'nother
train tonight, no music, no breathstroked
heartbeat in my infinite distrust of them

and of my distrusting self
white-doctor-who-breathed-for-him-all-night
say it for two sons gone,
say nightmare, say it loud
panebreaking heartmadness
nightmare begins responsibility

"A Mother Speaks: The Algiers Motel Incident, Detroit," "Nightmare Begins Responsibility," "Reuben, Reuben," and "Dear John, Dear Coltrane" from *Images of Kin: New and Selected Poems* by Michael S. Harper. Copyright © 1970-1977 by Michael S. Harper. Used by permission of the author and the University of Illinois Press.

ACTIVITIES

1. "Dear John, Dear Coltrane" honors a great musician. Listen to John Coltrane's music and find out all you can about him. Alone or with a small group, consider how this poem reflects his life and has been influenced by his music.

2. Listen to as many different kinds of jazz as you can and choose the piece which you think could be "great enough" to bring you back from deep pain. What does this music bring you back *to*? How does it bring you back? Play your choice for others who also tried this activity and compare.

3. "A Mother Speaks: The Algiers Motel Incident, Detroit" is a dramatic monologue. Alone or with a small group, read it as the mother might have said it. Listen to how others interpret her words. Discuss which versions are most convincing.

LUCILLE CLIFTON

"Poetry began when somebody wandered off a savanna or out of a cave and looked up at the sky with wonder and said, 'Ah-h-h!' That was the first poem."

Lucille Clifton is a prolific writer whose work affirms human endurance. Self taught, she turned society's lack of expectations for her to advantage, daring to become a poet. She has said, "Oh, poetry's probably saved my life. . .I think poetry has been the one faithful, good thing." Her six children are the inspiration for much of her work. A former poet laureate of Maryland, she teaches at Columbia University and St. Mary's College of Maryland.

if i should

to clark kent

enter the darkest room
in my house and speak
with my own voice, at last,
about its awful furniture,
pulling apart the covering
over the dusty bodies; the randy
father, the husband holding ice
in his hand like a blessing,
the mother bleeding into herself
and the small imploding girl,
i say if i should walk into
that web, who will come flying
after me, leaping tall buildings?
you?

slave cabin,
sotterly plantation, maryland, 1989

in this little room
note carefully

aunt nanny's bench

three words that label
things
aunt
is my parent's sister
nanny
my grandmother
bench
the board at which
i stare
the soft curved polished
wood
that held her bottom
after the long days
without end
without beginning
when she aunt nanny sat
feet dead against the dirty floor
humming for herself humming
her own sweet human name

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QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT:

What leads you back to a person you need to remember?

LUCILLE CLIFTON

fury

for mama

remember this.
she is standing by
the furnace.
the coals
glisten like rubies.
her hand is crying.
her hand is clutching
a sheaf of papers.
poems.
she gives them up.
they burn
jewels into jewels.
her eyes are animals.
each hank of her hair
is a serpent's obedient
wife.
she will never recover.
remember. there is nothing
you will not bear
for this woman's sake.

note, passed to superman

sweet jesus, superman,
if i had seen you
dressed in your blue suit
i would have known you.
maybe that choirboy clark
can stand around
listening to stories
but not you, not with
metropolis to save
and every crook in town
filthy with kryptonite.
lord, man of steel,
i understand the cape,
the leggings, the whole
ball of wax.
you can trust me,
there is no planet stranger
than the one i'm from.

QUESTIONS

1. In one of her poems Lucille Clifton asks, "won't you celebrate with me?" What do you think she celebrates through her poetry? What does "slave cabin, sotterly plantation, maryland, 1989" celebrate?

2. None of Lucille Clifton's poems on this card uses capital letters, and the poem "slave cabin..." has no punctuation at all. Why do you think she writes her poems this way? How does this practice help you read and understand her poems?

3. How is Lucille Clifton's attitude different in "if i should" and "note, passed to superman"? What do the poems reveal about the poet's past and her attitudes toward it?

4. In "fury," Lucille Clifton writes, "remember. there is nothing / you will not bear / for this woman's sake." How did watching her mother destroy her own poems affect her?

ACTIVITIES

*** 1.** Lucille Clifton says, "I have a feeling that sometimes rather than wrestle and look for words, you have to be still and let them come." Take the time to be still and let words come to you. Write whatever comes into your mind. Then arrange your words to express a feeling or an impression. Is the result a poem?

*** 2.** Lucille Clifton says, "Poetry began when somebody walked off a savanna or out of a cave and looked up at the sky with wonder and said, 'Ah-h-h!'" What triggers "Ah-h-h!" in you? Describe something that fills you with wonder. Describe its features and qualities. Tell how it affects your senses — what you see, hear, smell, taste, and feel.

3. Lucille Clifton says she always writes herself a birthday poem. Write yourself a birthday poem. Celebrate something about yourself.

4. In "slave cabin..." and "fury," Lucille Clifton honors people whose stories have not been told. Choose someone — a family member, friend, or even a stranger — whose story you want to tell. Tell that story either in writing or orally.

5. In "note, passed to superman," Lucille Clifton introduces herself to a popular fiction hero. Choose someone you think of as a hero — a real person or a fictional character. Write a note to that hero introducing youself. In your note tell what you have in common with that hero. Then go on to say something you would like that hero to know.

* May be adapted for discussing the work of other poets.

"if i should," "fury," and "note, passed to superman" from *The Book of Light*, copyright © 1993 by Lucille Clifton. Reprinted by permission of Copper Canyon Press. "slave cabin, sotterly plantation, maryland, 1989" copyright © 1991 by Lucille Clifton. Reprinted from *Quilting: Poems 1987-1990*, by Lucille Clifton, with the permission of BOA Editions Ltd. 92 Park Ave., Brockport, NY 14420.

Program 8: **Come Celebrate with Me**

DAVID MURA

"If poetry gets too far towards the realm of the aesthetic, the formal, and the beautiful and doesn't acknowledge the other side of existence — the history that we live in, the changes and the darkness of history — then life goes out of poetry and it becomes an escape."

David Mura was born to parents who had been placed in U.S. internment camps during World War II. His writings trace themes of betrayal and discrimination as well as his own struggles as a Japanese American. He says, "If I am able to write poems with a certain beauty and resonance, and if that beauty and resonance has truth, then the readers and listeners have no choice but to reckon with that truth."

AN ARGUMENT: ON 1942

— for my mother

Near Rose's Chop Suey and Jinosuke's grocery,
the temple where incense hovered and inspired
dense evening chants (prayers for Buddha's mercy,
colorless and deep), that day he was fired . . .

— No, no, no, she tells me. Why bring it back?
The camps are over. (Also overly dramatic.)
Forget *shoyu*-stained *furoshiki*, *mochi* on a stick:
You're like a terrier, David, gnawing a bone, an old, old trick. . .

Mostly we were bored. Women cooked and sewed,
men played black jack, dug gardens, a *benjo*.
Who noticed barbed wire, guards in the towers?
We were children, hunting stones, birds, wild flowers.

Yes, Mother hid tins of *tsukemono* and eel
beneath the bed. And when the last was peeled,
clamped tight her lips, growing thinner and thinner.
But cancer not the camps made her throat blacker.

. . . And she didn't die then . . . after the war, in St. Paul,
you weren't even born. Oh I know, I know, it's all
part of your job, your way, but why can't you glean
how far we've come, how much I can't recall —

David, it was so long ago — how useless it seems . . .

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QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT:

What happened before you were born that still matters to you now?

DAVID MURA

"An Argument: On 1942" and "Grandfather-In-Law" by permission of the author (from *After We Lost Our Way*, 1989).

QUESTIONS

1. Who is arguing in "An Argument: On 1942," and what is the argument? Explain the position you would take in this argument. What do you think the poet has achieved in this poem?
2. In "Grandfather-In-Law," how and why did David Mura's feelings toward his grandfather-in-law change?

ACTIVITIES

1. Talking about writing poetry, David Mura tells students "not to go in a straight line and not to think what they would logically think." He gives an example of using "rhythm and music" to create word images such as "sea...sickly sea...scissoring sea." Use his advice to create some word images of your own. Start with a word and let your mind play with its rhythm and music. Write down additional words that occur to you. Then repeat the process until you have a string of images. Shape your images into a poem.
2. David Mura says, "What poets like me are doing is creating a fuller, more complete picture of what America always was." In a small group, discuss the picture or pictures of America that David Mura and Lucille Clifton convey in their poems. Cite specific lines to support your ideas from "An Argument: On 1942," "Grandfather-In-Law," "if i should," "slave cabin," "fury," and "note, passed to superman."
3. In writing "An Argument: On 1942," David Mura was curious about an event in his parents' past, which is also a part of our country's history. What event in history that affected someone you know are you curious about? Gather information from the person, books, and other sources. Describe the significance of the event for the person and for you.

GRANDFATHER-IN-LAW

It's nothing really, and really, it could have been worse; and of course, he's
now several years dead
and his widow, well, if oftentimes she's sometimes distracted, overly
cautious when we visit —
after all, Boston isn't New York — she seems, for some reason, enormously
proud that there's now a writer in the family
and periodically, sends me clippings about the poet laureate, Thoreau, Anne
Sexton's daughter, Lowell, New England literary lore —
in which I fit, if I fit at all, simply because I write in English — as if color of
skin didn't matter anymore.
Still, years ago, during my first visit to Boston, when we were all asleep,
he, who used to require that my wife memorize lines of Longfellow or Poe
and recite them on the phone,
so that, every time he called, she ran outdoors and had to be coaxed back,
sometimes with threats, to talk to Pops
(though she remembers too his sly imitations of Lincoln, ice cream at
Brighams, burgers and fries, all the usual grandfatherly treats),
he, who for some reason was prejudiced against Albanians — where on earth
did he find them I wondered —
who, in the thirties, would vanish to New York, catch a show, buy a suit,
while up north,
the gas and water bills pounded the front door (his spendthrift ways startled
me with my grandfather's resemblance),
who for over forty years came down each morning, "How's the old goat?"
with a tie only his wife could knot circling his neck,
he slipped into my wife's room — we were unmarried at the time — and whispered so
softly she thought
he almost believed she was really asleep, and was saying this like a wish or
spell, some bohunk miscalculated Boston sense of duty:
"Don't make a mistake with your life, Susie. Don't make a mistake."
Well. The thing that gets me now, despite the dangling rantings I've let go,
is that, at least at that time,
he was right. There was, inside me, some pressing, raw unpeeled
persistence, some libidinous desire for dominance
that, in the scribbled first-drafts of my life, seemed to mark me as wastrel
and rageful, bound to be unfaithful,
to destroy, in some powerful, nuclear need, fissioned both by childhood
and racism, whatever came near —
And I can't help but feel, forgiving him now, that if she had listened, if she
had been awake,
if this flourishing solace, this muscled-for happiness, shared by us now, had
never awakened,
he would have become for me a symbol of my rage and self-destruction,
another raw, never healing wound,
and not this silenced grandfatherly presence, a crank and scoundrel, red-
necked Yankee who created the delicate seed of my wife, my child.